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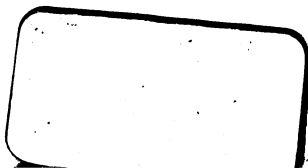
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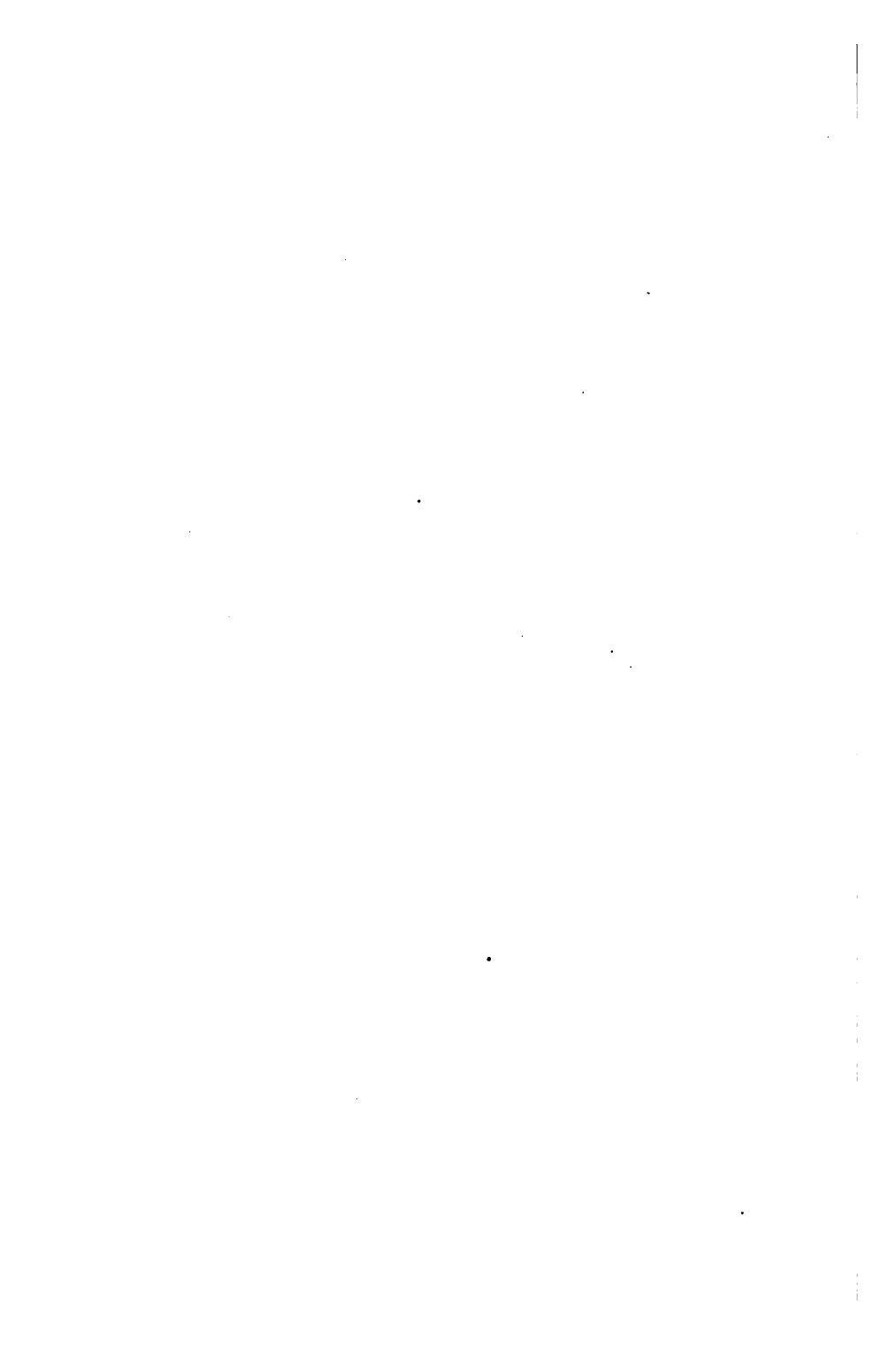
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MISS FORRESTER.



MISS FORRESTER.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. EDWARDS,

AUTHOR OF "THE MORALS OF MAY FAIR," "CREEDS," "THE ORDEAL
FOR WIVES," &c. &c.

"The leopard follows her nature as the lamb does, and acts after leopard law; she can neither help her beauty, nor her courage, nor her cruelty; nor a single spot on her shining coat; nor the conquering spirit which impels her; nor the shot which brings her down."—*Edmond*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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MISS FORRESTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO LOCKS OF HAIR.

“M. REYNAN had evidently not risen in his profession since the days when ‘Nita’ danced;” proceeded Bryanstone, “for he was still a ballet-director—and a ballet-director now at one of the poorest, shabbiest little theatres in Paris. I had had some difficulty in ascertaining that he was in existence at all; I had more still in getting an audience of him, for the corps de ballet was in the middle of rehearsal, when I penetrated into the unclean back premises of his theatre. The sight of a twenty-franc piece, however, induced a wandering sylphide to show me into what she termed the *foyer de la danse*, with the promise

that she would ensure the master waiting upon me the moment the dancing lesson was over ; and at the end of half-an-hour or so, M. Reynan entered, and without preamble or introduction of any kind, I asked him what I had come to learn. Did he recollect the girl called 'Nita,' who danced at such a theatre in fifty —? and could he give me any account of what had become of her since? M. Reynan looked at me narrowly : I may remark that he was a little, very old, very dirty, Frenchman, possessed of a great deal of manner, and frightful volubility : rested his forehead a minute in his hand, and then launched into a long history which told me nothing whatsoever, save what I already knew.

“ ‘Monsieur Reynan,’ I remarked, when he had done ; ‘I have come here to ascertain one or two plain facts, and to pay handsomely for them. Can you, or can you not, tell me anything about the girl ‘Nita,’ who danced in your corps de ballet in the year of which I speak?’ ”

“ At the word ‘pay,’ the whole expression of the man’s face changed ; he came close to my

side and laid one fabulously dirty finger upon my sleeve. (Mind, Nelly, I'm telling you a story to amuse *you*, and so I don't mind descending a little from high tragedy.) 'Monsieur,' he remarked, in a meaning whisper, 'I know *all* about the girl, Nita, and what became of her, and everything. But I'm a poor man, a poor man, Monsieur ; and in a profession like mine, secrecy is everything, and——'

"In short, he bargained for his price. I promised him what he asked ; not very much, really, poor little wretch ; but exorbitant according to his ideas ; and then he told me all he knew, which amounted to this :—

"A girl, known as Mademoiselle Nita, but who was by birth an Englishwoman, was engaged in 185— by the theatre of which, at that date, he was the ballet-director. She was nothing of a dancer ; but drew very good houses during one season by her extreme beauty. In the following winter she was tried at the Italian Opera, where she danced two nights ; then was hissed from the stage ; left Paris ; married, he had been afterwards told ; and died. I give you the bare

facts, Nelly, ungarnished by the extraneous matter relative to Mademoiselle Nita which Monsieur Reynan freely introduced. 'If Monsieur wishes to see her portrait, it hangs in our little gallery of artistic celebrities,' he remarked, when the story was told. 'Would Monsieur give himself the trouble to turn his head and look at it?'

"I did so, and there—in a company I can't talk to you about, Nelly—hung a coloured photograph of—the dancer Nita. She was dancing a Spanish shawl-dance with her bare arms clasped above her little golden head, with a dress reduced to the extremest limits that even the ballet allows, with—no, Nelly, no, no, no!" he broke off, passionately, "I can't talk about that. The picture was of Honoria! younger, slighter, fairer, but Honoria! I took her photograph from my pocket and compared the faces, line for line—and hers is no common face, as you know. If I had thought the Jarvises' testimony convincing, what was this?"

"'Monsieur appears to be gravely interested,' said the old Frenchman, watching me closely.

‘If Monsieur really desired more detailed information as to the young person’s history, it would not be difficult to give it him. One of the old friends and companions of Nita performed at present in his corps de ballet, and was at this moment in her dressing-room, not a dozen yards away. Would Monsieur see this person’? Mademoiselle Fifine, or some such name. We’ll call her Fifine, at all events.

“I answered quietly, ‘Yes, I would see her;’ took my purse from my pocket and paid him, and then Monsieur Reynan went out of the room, and I was left alone—left to the contemplation of the works of French art that surrounded me (Nita conspicuous above them all), and to such ideas as their sufficiently varied styles of beauty might suggest!

“In about a quarter of an hour Monsieur Reynan returned with Mademoiselle Fifine—a miserable-looking woman, dressed in a faded silk, rouged even at this hour of the morning, and with a stronger odour of absynthe than was agreeable pervading her whole presence.

“Either she was less rapacious than Mon-

sieur Reynan, or she thought an ingenuous air the likeliest one to pay. She began without bargaining, at all events, to answer my questions.

“ ‘Nita—the poor Nita? Mon Dieu, if I know her! But she was one of my most intimate friends. Do you know, Monsieur, that the Nita and I came out in the same year? We made our début at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin, both. Ah, yes; eight—nine years, it must be,’ turning to Monsieur Reynan, ‘since Nita was first engaged by you. Is it not?’

“ ‘It was in 185—,’ Monsieur Reynan replied, after a moment’s consideration. ‘Nine years ago exactly.’

“ ‘And under what name was she entered upon your lists?’ I inquired.

“ ‘Mais c’est evident! Under the name of Nita Dupont,’ answered the old man, promptly. ‘By what name but her own should she have been entered?’

“ ‘Her own name was not Dupont,’ I remarked. ‘Dupont is not an English name, at all.’

“Monsieur Reynan and Mademoiselle Fifine gave a simultaneous shrug of the shoulders.

“‘If Monsieur searched the lists of every theatre at which the Nita danced he would find no name but Dupont,’ they answered, both in a breath.

“‘But she was an Englishwoman,’ I remarked, looking straight into Mademoiselle Fifine’s eyes. ‘As one of her intimate friends, Madame, you were doubtless aware of that fact.’

“‘Monsieur,’ answered the dancer, ‘I was told by others that Nita was an Englishwoman. From herself I never heard it; and as far as accent went, she might have passed for a Parisienne.’

“‘And you never heard of her under any other name than that of Dupont?’

“‘Never, until after her marriage.’

“‘And then?’

“‘Her name, of course, was her husband’s—Bernadin.’

“I reflected for a minute, and decided that it was useless to press for information that these

people either could not, or would not, give. Besides, if Nita Dupont was dead, what mattered her name; what mattered her country; what mattered any detail of her history to me?

“‘You will excuse me for my pertinacity, Madame,’ I remarked; ‘but it is no idle curiosity that prompts me to ask these questions. Were you acquainted with Nita Dupont after her marriage, and also at the time of her death? This is the last inquiry with which I shall have to trouble you.’

“Mademoiselle Fifine looked over her shoulder suspiciously; then walked to the door and made sure of its fastening before she replied. ‘Monsieur,’ she observed in a whisper, which, as Monsieur Reynan had now left the room, was certainly unnecessary. ‘I know nothing of the Nita after her marriage, beyond occasionally passing her with a bow or a “bon jour” in the street. But I saw her close—close, Monsieur, after her death! Yes, I saw her then!’ And Mademoiselle Fifine cast her little black eyes up to the dingy ceiling of the salle with a look of melo-

dramatic meaning, that at once told me she wished to be asked more questions.

“I put them, and at the end of an hour I got out the whole of her story. I can tell it you, Nelly, in two minutes. Upon Nita’s return, married, to Paris, Fifine and other of her female friends, naturally showed a disposition to renew their intimacy with their old companion. But Nita’s husband would have none of them in his house. His wife was sick ; his wife had done with theatres and theatrical people : his wife had domestic duties to attend to. They all knew what this meant, of course. Nita had fallen into the hands of a horrid, suspicious monster, who was jealous of her past life and all belonging to it. When, occasionally, any of them passed the poor child, walking with him, plainly dressed, and pale and thin, à *faire peur* ! a little short bow, a nervous word or two, was all she evidently dared give them.

“And even this soon came to an end. One morning, within a year after the marriage, as Mademoiselle Fifine was returning home from

rehearsal, one of her friends told her that Nita was dead—had died that morning.

“‘I went to their house at once,’ she concluded, not without an appearance of genuine feeling, ‘and, after hearing from the porter that Monsieur Bernadin was out, walked straight up to the quatrième where my poor friend’s apartment was. An old woman who answered the bell told me that Monsieur was out, and that it was impossible for me to come in till his return. But having got thus far I was not to be turned away so easily, and just brushing the old woman away—so, I walked straight into the sitting-room, then on through another smaller apartment to a bedroom—the room of death!’ And Mademoiselle dissolved.

“‘Nothing had been done for the poor dear corpse,’ she resumed, when she saw that I was prepared to wait patiently while she wept. ‘No holy water at the head of the bed, no flowers on her breast, not so much as I have seen done for some poor nameless wretch dying in an hospital. The blind was left up, and the sun came in. Yes, Monsieur, the sun actually shone, indecently,

on the livid face of the dead—the face that half the men in Paris had once been fit to fall down and worship! Well, I went to her side; stooped over, and looked at her. She was changed, of course, for she died, as they said, of your national disease, and her features and hands had become frightfully emaciated since I saw them last. But it wasn't this that shocked me: I was prepared for this. Monsieur,' and again the woman looked over her shoulder nervously. 'I saw a thing about Nita's corpse that I have never seen (and I've seen hundreds of 'em) on any corpse before. *The colour of her hair had utterly changed.* It used to be a bright glittering yellow; such a colour as you won't see twice in your life; except on a young child's head; and now — it was a dull, heavy red!'

"'Impossible,' I said quickly; but I heard that my voice had a sound unlike its own, for a ghastly coincidence, in that moment of time, had already crossed my thoughts. 'You were excited at the sight of your dead friend,' I added. 'You made no allowance for long illness

taking away the lustre of health from the young woman's hair.'

" 'Monsieur,' she answered, 'I was no more excited then than I am now. As to illness taking the brightness from the hair, I know certainly that it would do so, but it would never change its colour totally. Nita's hair in life was yellow—I've a lock of it now; I could show it to you. After her death it was a dull, dark red. I'm not superstitious, Monsieur, quite the other thing. But to my last hour I'll swear no natural illness ever worked such a change as that.'

" 'And you think, then—?' I began to suggest, carelessly.

" 'I think that Nita Dupont was poisoned,' she interrupted, coming close to me and almost whispering the words; 'and I think the effects of the poison worked the change in her that I tell you of. *A dieu ne plaise* that I should be learned in such things!' she added. 'But the moment I saw her the thought of foul play struck me; and what should I do, Monsieur, but I took out my work-case from my pocket, got

out my scissors, and before the old nurse could stop me, cut off a long tress from her head ! Almost before I'd finished I heard Bernadin's step, and flew, too thankful to escape with only his curses, as he passed, for my impudence in entering his apartment—for of course, Monsieur, if he had murdered his wife he might have murdered me as easily ! And from that day to this I never saw him again. He was arrested not a fortnight afterwards, for reasons of state, I believe, and since then I have heard, I think, that he died in prison.

“ ‘ But, Monsieur, though I could do nothing at the time, nor since—what would the evidence of one poor girl like me have been worth ? and what good, now she was dead, would it have been to Nita to prove she'd been murdered ?—I've never gone from my first thought. I put the question once, without names, to a friend of mine, a very scientific man indeed, and he laughed at the idea of poison, and said much more likely my friend had dyed her hair. So I gave him a little piece to examine, and he poured acids, and gases, and things on it, and it was

not dyed: dyed! what should a woman with such hair as Nita's dye it for? And that confirmed me in my belief. Monsieur,' she added, 'I see that you think as I do. Monsieur has turned as white as death.'

"I need scarcely tell you, Nelly, that I did not for a second share in the woman's ridiculous suspicions of poison, or that, supposing I had done so, I should have been wholly indifferent to the domestic differences of Monsieur and Madame Bernadin. What contracted my heart—what, for aught I know, did make my cheek pale, was this story of the hair changing its colour, upon which I seemed to be coming everywhere. Honoria, a dozen times since her marriage, had told me of the singular change her hair had undergone of late years; the Jarvises and their servant had spoken of it while they knew her as red; my uncle was ready to swear to her as the celebrated Nita of years ago from the yellow colour of her hair alone; and now this friend and companion of Nita Dupont informed me that her friend's hair after death was no longer gold, but red; dull, deep red, just as the

Jarvises' servant had described Miss Honoria Forrester's! Was I beginning, darkly, to discern the clue I sought, and yet dreaded to find?

"I thanked Mademoiselle Ffine for her confidences; gave her a sum which perfectly satisfied her conscience as to having yielded them; and after considerable argument, and many assurances that I was not going to bring her evidence forward in any way, bribed her into promising me the two locks of hair whose difference of colour formed the strong point of her story. She sent them faithfully to my hotel that afternoon; and I was able to compare them. You may do so now, Nelly. Here they are in my hand. Before going out to meet Lumley I put them up, with Sir Hyde Bryanstone's letter and one or two other papers, into a packet that would have come into Honoria's hands if I had been killed. Living, it is my place, inch by inch, line by line, to find out the truth and act upon it. I owe it simply to myself and to my people to do so; and mercy in the way of concealment I will show her none, if she prove guilty. But when I was just

face to face with the possibility of death, Nelly, it seemed different. I have, thank God! no child to call Honoria 'mother,' and if I had died she would simply have passed away quietly, out of the family, and our share in her story would have ended. And thinking this, I just put up such traces of her secret as I possessed into a packet, accompanied by two or three lines, concerning whose purport"—and here Bryanstone's lips did for a moment tremble—"I need not say anything now. I was not killed; and the packet has not left my dressing-case till now. Here it is, and here are the two locks of chameleon hair. Tell me if you think, with Mademoiselle Fifine, that either poison or witchcraft could have effected the change?"

And as he spoke, Bryanstone produced a small folded packet from an envelope, and placed it in Nelly's hand.

She opened it without a word, and examined the two tresses of hair that it contained long and narrowly. "Mr. Bryanstone," she cried, when her survey was ended, "I wish to take no part in all this. In my heart I try not to admit a

suspicion even of Honoria. But one thing I would swear ; these two locks of hair were never cut from the same woman's head ! The red piece is coarse and harsh, the yellow fine and supple as silk ; so much I know."

"You are right, Nelly, I felt the same the moment I received them from Mademoiselle Fifine. Those two pieces of hair were never cut from the same woman's head. All evidence connected with the red hair I set aside at once, as not concerning myself in any way. It belonged to a certain Madame Bernadin, dead and in her grave. Had the golden tress been cut from the head of the woman I call my wife, or had it not? Even with no counter-interest at work, evidence that shall *prove* any human being's identity is about the hardest that a man can set himself to obtain. On calmly reviewing such broken links as had already come into my possession, it became clear to me at once that the person whose testimony would be worth a thousand-fold more to me than any other must be Bernadin. The man who married Nita the dancer, must have it in his power, if he chose, to

throw light upon whatever mystery was connected with this part at least of Sir Hyde Bryanstone's suspicions. I found out more than one person who spoke vaguely of his death, but none of them could give me any certain information as to the place or time of its occurrence. By communicating with the police, however, I should be able to ascertain whether he lived or not; and had it not been for the misfortune of getting wounded in this accursed duel, I should in another week have been back in Paris, and have probably brought the whole inquiry to an end."

"And how were you led into that horrible wicked act at all, sir?—for indeed I must call it by its right name, even though you did it and think it honour. Suspecting, disbelieving Honoria as you did, what made you risk your own life and another's for her sake?"

"Nelly, it was not for her sake at all. A blackguard—the man whose cowardly shot has brought me to this pass—had spoken lightly of my wife, and it was my plain part, whatever her demerit, to tell him that he lied. I did so, on the morning I came to town before seeing the

Miss Jarvises ; but making some other cause the pretext for my insult to him. You know the rest. Nelly, child," he added, "these are not subjects for you at all. Go back to Norfolk, and don't trouble yourself too much about me. My present life won't last very long. One way or another it must be decided. Why, 'tis too monstrous, too monstrous!" he exclaimed, the blood rising in his pale face, "to think that such a history *can* remain hid, when the man most interested in it would move heaven and earth—would give his own soul, to lay it bare ! The first step I shall take, as soon as I can act at all, will be to search for Bernadin. If Bernadin lives——"

He stopped abruptly, for a hand was softly turning the handle of the door. In another moment Honoria, with her usual silent tread, entered the room. The afternoon had faded, unnoticed, into evening, while Bryanstone had told his story ; but, dim though the light was, Nelly Bertram noticed a ghastly fixedness about Honoria's lips as she came forward, with a little set speech full of delight, and wonder, and thank-

fulness that dear Henry should already have strength enough to sit up so long!

His last words had been of Bernadin; had Mrs. Bryanstone heard them?

CHAPTER II.

TELL HIM THE TRUTH.

HONORIA was in despair when Nelly next morning announced her intention of going home. Henry would have a relapse—Henry would be so dull. No one read aloud, no one did anything, like Nelly. Why, even that monster, Martin, had left off suspecting people of poisoning each other since Nelly came: with more of the same nature.

I don't think her eloquence would have effected much; indeed, Bryanstone grew more and more obstinate about Nelly's departure the more Honoria pressed her to stay; had not a *deus ex máchina* in the shape of a letter from Uncle Frank, given opportune weight to Mrs. Bryanstone's wishes. Mr. Bertram had exchanged

duties with a brother clergyman at the sea-side for six weeks, this letter announced; and Nelly could either accept her friends' solicitations to remain at Brussels, or go and stay with her Aunt Lydia at Ramsgate. He, Uncle Frank, would be back at the Parsonage on such a date in March, and would expect her to be home on that evening to make his tea for him.

Now Nelly was not at all a heroine or an angel, but a faulty, impressionable, oftentimes most unreasonable, young woman, formed of the commonest flesh and blood; and every word that she had said about wanting to go to her duties was false; and the delight she felt on hearing she might stay longer with Bryanstone was real. "If Honoria wished me gone, or was jealous of me in any way, it would be different," she thought, when she had been having a tough battle with her conscience about going to her Aunt Lydia, and had gained a decided victory over that somewhat resilient faculty; "or if Mr. Bryanstone looked on me in any other light than what he does—a plain, patient sort of

woman, who has nursed him diligently in his sickness—or if the state of things between them was not so miserable, and I did not think I could at least ward the evil day off by remaining.”

And then she went away with rather a hypocritical air of doubt to Mr. Bryanstone, and informed him of her uncle's letter, and of Honoria's arguments, and her own vacillation ; “and of course I shall just do as you wish, and as you think best for me to do, Mr. Bryanstone.”

And looking at her flushed, downcast face, Bryanstone, you may be quite sure, went speedily round from all his former views, and thought the best thing for Miss Bertram to do would be to stay in Brussels.

Mrs. Bryanstone's face betrayed more gratification than Nelly had ever yet seen her show, on the morning of Uncle Frank's letter. It was no matter of common interest to her whether her visitor went or stayed. What the future might hold in store she did not, perhaps she dared not, ask herself ; indeed, she had long

ago felt that in a life of sharp transitions, of fierce hourly gambling like hers, the future is an unprofitable problem to dwell too much upon. The present was her own, to make use of, to work in; and every day that Bryanstone remained quiescent was, at the present juncture, an enormous gain to her. She had had a letter quite recently from Stretton, telling her that he was about to enlist in the Federal army: a lucky bullet any hour might rid her of him: and somehow Stretton, with all his cowardice, was in her inmost heart the enemy she dreaded most. If he was dead, and the Count—but she loathed having to think that thought out—the Count silenced, there was then only one tongue left that could with certainty bear evidence against her. Only Bernadin: the man she had years ago betrayed, and whom she fervently hoped might now prove to be dead.

She strove to believe that it was impossible she *could* have heard the word “Bernadin” that night on Bryanstone’s lips; but, reason as she would, the bare suspicion tortured her horribly; and, as I have said, every day in which she

could still keep Bryanstone under her eyes seemed a priceless gain to her. Within two hours after she had interrupted his conversation with Nelly, she had made the Count de St. Georges start for Paris. It was possible she might have been mistaken altogether. It was possible, barely possible, that Bryanstone was speaking of some other man named Bernadin. But the faintest chance of his being upon the right scent was too all-important to neglect, whatever it cost. St. Georges had been despatched alone to Paris to ascertain, through every channel he had at command, if Bryanstone had been making inquiries before him ; also to see Bernadin, if he lived, and find out his present state of temper and finance. And Honoria, calm outwardly, but with a very fever of excitement burning at her heart, had during this time to go through the daily round of domestic acting with Nelly and her husband.

However he meant to pursue his search hereafter, Bryanstone was quiescent now. Honoria's instinct was right in desiring to keep Nelly near him in these first irritable days of convalescence.

For Miss Bertram merely to be in the room soothed him: her conversation, her silence, suited him alike. She never bored him—she never allowed him to bore himself; and with life hanging still by so feeble and uncertain a thread, there was perhaps nothing very cowardly in his shrinking a little longer from his repulsive task, and abandoning himself without reserve to the tenderest friendship a man, sick or well, can know—a friendship for a woman with whom he is not, and believes he never will be, in love.

Not in love? Certainly not in love. Once or twice of late Bryanstone had asked himself what his feelings were towards this patient nurse of his, and this was always the answer: he was not, he never had been, in love with her; and yet how far more of a companion she was than any woman he had loved! how entirely, if he had married her, she would have suited him!

It is not a very new story. 'The eternal sadness of all our lives is in that thought, "Some one lives who would have suited us." We live

we middle-aged men and women of the world, and rear up children, and make money; eat, sleep, and increase in weight; and are alone! The human creature who would have suited us to every fibre of our being we have not found, or, having found, have not possessed; or, worse still, have had a chance of possessing, but undervalued, and so allowed to pass away out of our lives! This last was Bryanstone's case. Nelly's nature fitted into his nature utterly. In whatever mood he was, her presence was welcome to him. He could not have said, "This woman is like or unlike me;" he knew only that she was what he wanted—mind, heart, and soul; and that he might have possessed her, and had not willed to do so! Also, that all sense of Nelly's suiting him, all the love of her pleading eyes and touching voice and tender hand, would not at all undo the knot that tied him now to Honoria Forrester.

As his strength increased, and Bryanstone was able daily to do more, the two women were naturally more and more thrown upon each other's society. And although Nelly Bertram

detested Honoria's character as thoroughly as she had done from the first, she was forced to confess to herself that, as a companion, Bryanstone's wife was far from repulsive to her. All frivolity (the quality most inherently distasteful to Miss Bertram) was on the surface with Mrs. Bryanstone. *Au fond* the character was strong and grave to an extent of which the world, and even Bryanstone himself, was wholly ignorant. Something of the greatness which accompanies all fixed ambition, kept her above the petty vices of better women. In her way she was magnanimous. If you stood in her path, she would have you removed from it, without pity, without hesitation as to means; but she did not in the meantime worry you with pin-pricks. Many women might have wished to turn to account a female friend's influence over a husband, as she did; but not one in a thousand would have been able to treat her rival with perfect, generous delicacy all the time. She was really too bad—I mean, she lived in a moral atmosphere too essentially remote from the common one—for any such concessions to

human frailty. Imagine any really well-principled British matron similarly placed, and say if she would not have felt it her duty to let "the other person" know her opinion of young women who suffered from unrequited attachments, who allowed their thoughts to hanker after married men, and so forth. Honoria simply looked upon Nelly and upon Bryanstone as instruments to be worked as she best might for the attainment of her own ends; and could no more have felt small jealousies or tempers concerning them, than I could feel jealousies and tempers against the pen with which I am writing.

One afternoon late Mrs. Bryanstone entered the salon, and saw Nelly Bertram seated alone by the open window watching the street with wide-open, eager eyes, and with neither work nor book in her hand. Honoria knew quite well what the girl was doing. She was waiting, watching there for Bryanstone's return; and suddenly something of the pathos of this hopeless, patient love smote upon Honoria's heart, and she stood silent, and with a sort of mixed curiosity and

pity, looked long at Nelly's face, and tried to speculate upon the nature of her thoughts.

In her life, you must recollect, Honoria had never known the faintest approximation to the sentiment of love. The capacity for it had been crushed as utterly in her as it is in the majority of young women of the world whose profession is marriage; and not very differently crushed either. From the time she was a little girl of fourteen, the grand maxims instilled into her by her compeers had been that men were natural enemies, to be flattered, won, cast over pitilessly for richer rivals. A caprice, a sentiment, had been pointed out to her in the same light as a poor love-match is pointed out by Belgravian veterans to young women in drawing-rooms. Men were possessors of money; from which money it was right and honourable to dispossess them. She knew no other code. Neither in her tarnished youth, nor, I regret to say, in these later years that she had spent among honest people, had one sample of disinterested hearty human love come under her eyes; and what she had seen of it in operas and novels never touched

her, never appealed to her in the least—for the woman's nature was singularly realistic and devoid of imagination.

But if a bushman from Central Africa could come suddenly into a crowded cathedral at the moment when the host was being blest, the crowd hushed and prostrate, the organ wailing out the first soft notes of the "Agnus Dei," you may be certain some dim sense, some instinct of the meaning of that scene, would wake in him; just as a glimmering of the nature of love crossed Mrs. Bryanstone's barren soul as she looked at Nelly Bertram now. All humanity, however sunk in barbarism, has an instinct towards its God. All women, however denaturalised by civilisation, have an instinct towards love. Was there pleasure in this kind of worship, she wondered? Was this poor little plain woman sensible of some occult satisfaction in sitting patiently watching for the first sight of a man who never had been, and never would be, of the slightest tangible advantage to her? What could the pleasure of love be? What *could* be pleasure, in which no gratified vanity, no money, no scope

for personal ambition of any kind had place? She could understand the sort of excitement men got out of field-sports. There was a prey to be run down; a definite object, although only the death of a hare or a fox, to be encompassed. She could understand a passion for art—art led to fame; or for politics, or war. But this—great heavens! this fidelity without profit! this patient, hopeless self-forgetfulness! What was its meaning?

I repeat, such dim intuitions of love as a savage looking on at High Mass might gain of religious worship, overcame Honoria's mind; but there she stopped. All the rapture, all the consolations of that poor worshipper at whom she was looking, were a sealed book to her. It was love; it was something vaguely above her own comprehension; it was disconnected wholly with silk dresses, equipages, and trinkets. So much Mrs. Bryanstone knew, and no more.

Perhaps if she could have really read Nelly's thoughts at this moment, she would not have found them very transcendental. Human creatures in real life are so much the reverse of grandiloquent

in their own inmost hearts ! “ Five o’clock, and he has not returned yet ! ” they ran ; only that words never faithfully transcribe thoughts : “ and he said, for certain he would be in at four. Perhaps he has met that English girl he admired so much yesterday, and has been introduced, and is walking with her in the park and looking in her face now. Beauty I saw none. Little baby-faced woman with foolish blue eyes, but that’s what he likes, what all men like. And what does it matter to me what Mr. Bryanstone likes ? Not a bit, not a bit. Thank Heaven, I am free from all the old folly now ! He told me I was thinner to-day, and I am. I take six and a-quarter, instead of six and a-half, now. What should make me fat ? Do I eat ? do I sleep ? do I go out ? And does it matter any of it ? If I was as plump as Honoria, I should never be pretty—never—never ! and if I’d only been pretty I should have been loved—all pretty women are. Why, Mr. Bryanstone will come round from his suspicions and love Honoria again some day ! If I had her yellow hair and white throat, he wouldn’t call me little girl, and child, and

Nelly to my face. It's my plainness makes him feel such friendship for me as a man might for a man, and I—I—I—am fool enough to feel my heart turn sick when he only looks at me! I, Nelly Bertram, who call myself proud and good and honest, pining for the sake of a married man who looks on me like his sister!"

And at this juncture the tears rose up in Miss Bertram's eyes, and she clasped her hands with a gesture of such genuine, simple pain, that Mrs. Bryanstone thought it well to turn the handle of the door loudly as a token of her presence.

"Sitting alone, Nelly? I thought you were with Henry. Haven't you been out to-day?" And then with her habitual tact, Honoria never looked at the girl's tear-stained face, but gave her time to collect herself by running on into a dissertation upon the fineness of the weather, the dryness of the streets, and the lovely blue crape bonnet she had that morning bought at Madame Annette's.

"Not that you care for bonnets," she finished, as she took a chair in the window opposite Miss Bertram. "I wonder sometimes what you do

care for, Nelly? Not earthly vanities, certainly."

The remark jarred on Nelly Bertram horribly; much more than any speech of Honoria's was wont to jar on her. "I care for vanities as much as you," she said bluntly. "I should like dress as much as you do, if I was pretty and had money. Because I'm plain is no reason that I should be without the common feelings and vanities that make up other women's lives. I've got them all. I wouldn't like a blue crape bonnet, because, with my skin, I should look hideous in it. I'd like a white one, relieved with a little good black lace and with one crimson rose for trimming. Plain as I am, I could dress in perfect taste if I had money to spend on it, and—any one to please by dressing well!" she added, with a stifled sigh.

"Nelly," cried Mrs. Bryanstone, with the kindly show of interest that her French bringing up had made so natural to her, "there cannot be a greater mistake than to speak of being pretty as a thing by itself. Every woman with taste in dress, with the desire to please, above

all, with animation, *is* pretty ; that is to say, has all the solid and material advantages of beauty. Look at Frenchwomen. I declare that when you analyse their features and wash off their cosmetics, not one Frenchwoman in a hundred is decent looking, but they succeed in pleasing infinitely better than Englishwomen with all their beauty do, and why? They wish to please, and dress well, and make up well, certainly. But they do a great deal more. They make themselves the companions of men. You are a Frenchwoman, there, Nelly. No English girl I ever knew could have amused a sick and dissatisfied man like Henry as you have done."

It was the quintessence of subtle flattery ; but the acting was so delicately perfect that to Nelly it sounded like magnanimity of the very first water ; and in a moment all her own generous heart was ready to cry out in response.

"I've been quiet and patient with Mr. Bryanstone, nothing more, Honoria. Perhaps I've rather a turn for nursing sick people ; I don't know. If you, with all your liveliness, had chosen to try to amuse him, and—and—yes, Mrs. Bry-

anstone, for once I'll speak out—if you were more open with him, and tried to bring about a better state of things, you know quite well you could be a fitter companion to Mr. Bryanstone than I am."

The words almost choked her; it occasioned her such infinite, such complex pain to give them utterance. As for Mrs. Bryanstone, she held her handkerchief to her eyes and meditated. "The little fool believes me jealous, and wants to reassure me," she thought. "Now, if ever, will be the time to find out if he did mention Bernadin. Nelly!" she exclaimed aloud, "what you say is meant for kindness, and does you infinite credit, but—I—I—no, Nelly! I know that Henry would make confidences to you, child as you are, that he would not make to me. I am not jealous. Heaven knows, whatever my faults are, that sort of small meanness is not one of them—but the other evening when I came in, I found him talking with you—you remember, the first day he was able to sit up? a pang did cross my heart as I thought I should never be able to interest him as you can. Nelly, I'm not really frivolous.

I don't care, at my heart, for balls and parties. I'd give them all up to-morrow if he wished. I'm not really frivolous. I'm not without certain ability, and power of conversation. Numbers of other men have found me a good companion, but Henry never will. Never, while I live !”

Not a syllable, not a look, was over-acted, and the tone in which Mrs. Bryanstone spoke was really not without a quiet, half-reproachful, natural emotion. Nelly felt horribly guilty. The blood rushed into her face ; her hands got like ice. She felt in I know not what position of blackest treachery, both to husband and wife. She who, up to that moment, would willingly have sacrificed herself in any way but to bring them together, and make Bryanstone's home at peace.

“For curiosity, tell me, now, what you talked about that day ?” Honoria pursued, after casting one stealthy glance at her confused face. “I don't mean all, of course. Heaven forbid I should task your memory so far ; but the latter part I've a real wish to know,—the part about some man called—called Bernadin ? I heard as much as that, and I should like to know the

kind of subject that would interest poor Henry now."

Then Nelly looked abruptly, and caught Mrs. Bryanstone's eyes. Their latent expression of intense, acute suspicion, struck her in an instant. She remembered how the noiseless footsteps had entered Bryanstone's room; how rigid and strange Honoria's lips had looked when she came up to them, and—reader, what sensation do you suppose overcame Miss Bertram with regard to her rival at this moment?—profoundest pity. The only time Nelly ever was in London in her life, her aunt Lydia took her to the opera to see "Lucretia Borgia," and at the point when her denouncers gather round the hapless heroine, every fresh voice swelling the chorus that proclaims her infamy, Nelly, then fifteen, had, in spite of all Aunt Lydia's didactic moralisings, burst into tears, and declared her sympathies to be with the guilty one.

Something of the same emotion, of the same desire to stand by the losing side, touched her now. Mrs. Bryanstone was alone. However guilty, she was fighting an unequal fight, and

one in which Nelly's reason told her she must fall.

"Honoraria," she cried, jumping up, and moving nervously from the window, "I don't remember all Mr. Bryanstone said; and if I did, I wouldn't think it right to repeat it even to you. But this I do say,—you ought to try to win his confidence, and give him yours. I know enough of his character to feel sure that nothing would ever gain upon him like perfect truth on your side."

Then, actually frightened at her own boldness, and at the whole position in which she stood, the girl broke off abruptly, and rushed away out of the room.

"And St. Georges called me a fool to have her here," thought Mrs. Bryanstone; "sneered when I said the things she called principle, honour, generosity, could be turned to good account. Tell him the truth! Poor little mole, didn't she see that her own advice gave me all the information I wanted? He suspects me, and makes her his confidante."

"Tell him the truth;" after a long pause this,

and when she was watching Bryanstone's face as he entered the courtyard beneath the window. "I'm not sure sometimes that I won't; or some truth. The time is coming fast when passive defence will not be enough. Tell him the truth."

The mere novelty of the idea gave it a certain piquancy to Mrs. Bryanstone. Nelly evidently understood Bryanstone's character. A woman as much in love as to be able to await a man's coming patiently for pleasure, was not likely to give advice adverse to what she conceived to be for his good. How could one know that, to a man of his proud nature, confidence might not be the best card that now remained for her to play?—or if not actual confidence, what should look like it? At the next turn fate took against her, how would it be to assume the initiative, and speak? If, in spite of all her precautions, Bernadin came to light, or Stretton returned, it would indisputably be better for Bryanstone to hear the history of the past from her lips than from theirs. The past! Well—but the past was dead and gone. Could anything be *proved*?

Was not one clue, the most important of all, her own identity, buried in a moss-grown grave at Père la Chaise? The dead, at least, could not rise up against her. Why, with Bernadin himself confronting her, it would be but a matter of hard swearing on both sides to decide whose body lay in those six feet of earth.

Aye, this was the strongest point of defence left to her now. Tell him the truth.

CHAPTER III.

A SCENE AT THE THEATRE.

ALL the Brussels world was at the Opera that night, Honoria Bryanstone amongst them.

It was the first appearance of a new singer, and in the whole brilliant tier of boxes of that most brilliant little theatre in the world, the eye could scarce detect one vacant place. As she took her seat in one of the stage-boxes, and cast a rapid glance over the crowded house, the whole mass of detail of another début (a début in Paris, of ten years or more ago) flashed full upon Honoria's recollections.

Her cool, unemotional temperament rendered such visitations of rare occurrence to her ; hence, probably, why she was really so lightly burthened by vain regrets. Human beings who repent and grieve, are human beings with keen-

wrought nerves, with a brain that never tires of reproducing for them the raw material—the *mise-en-scène*—of ancient guilt. To Honoria, with her magnificent digestion, her boundless capacity for sleep, a thing done was done. None of the phantasmagoria of weaker stomachs and less healthy brains, keeping up that fever of unforgetfulness that we call remorse. •

But for once the electric cord was smote even in her. For a minute, this was not the Brussels theatre; she was not Henry Bryanstone's wife. Again, a trembling, half-clad child of seventeen, she stood, alone and dazzled, as the curtain rose for the ballet at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin. Again that white sea of human faces, the men and women whose applause or censure was to be her fate, surged before her; again she felt all the sickness of that supreme moment; again saw, as a drowning man reviews in a moment whole years of life, every detail of the scene; the musicians looking at her over their instruments; the critics, cool and impassive, in the stalls; the silent pit, the brilliant tier of boxes, the indistinct cloud of

bloused and bonneted figures, close, as it seemed, beneath the roof; again she felt all the torture of the first scene, when hisses from the other faction (every actor or dancer believes in a faction) so nearly carried the day; again she felt her heart, her brain, her feet, her whole being carried away by rapture as the hisses, minute by minute, became less audible amidst the general applause; again her head swam with the wild intoxication of that moment, when recalled for the second, for the third time, and standing amidst a perfect avalanche of flowers, she clasped one childish hand above her heart, and with the other sent kisses to a crowd of eighteen hundred people. For a minute, and only for a minute; then Honoria remembered quite well who she was now, and that the lorgnettes of half the men in the Brussels theatre were turned upon her, and that no woman in that theatre was handsomer or better dressed than herself, Henry Bryanstone's wife.

Since his accident—by this euphemism she called the duel, even to her own thoughts—she had considered it good taste always to be dressed

in subdued demi-toilettes when she appeared in public. Now that her husband was abroad again, however, she felt that even the exigencies of English convention need no longer restrain her as to colours; and to-night, for the first time, she appeared in full evening dress. It was a dress that suited her hair and skin to perfection. Violet velvet, opening over a stomacher and under-skirt of white satin—she was always slightly theatrical in style—with knots of pearls for trimming, and tiara and necklace to match. Like all women who are artistes in the science of dress, Honoria, as I have once before remarked, thoroughly understood the value of change. Her beauty never tired you, for it was never twice the same. To-night her cheeks were colourless as marble, a faint bistre shade surrounded her eyes, and then, in marvellous contrast, her hair, irradiated by heaven knows what mystic process, was more yellow than gold itself; her lips were vivid scarlet, her eyebrows and eyelashes black as night itself. She knew how beautiful men were thinking her, and her heart quickened at the thought. Her life was not a

bad life, she decided, even taking it with all its fierce risks of shame and failure. For ten years, ever since she was a little girl of sixteen, she had been admired, and there was not a line, a sign of falling off, on her face yet. She might be as handsome as ever for another ten years. Ten? why should she even put that limit to her power? Was she not of the fair complexion, of the matchless health, which might make a second Ninon de l'Enclos? Understanding dress, in the largest sense of the term, as she did, why should not that fatal fortieth birthday, which to most women is as a death-knell, come and pass by uncared for?

If only—if only St. Georges were but to arrive and set her latest fear at rest! tell her that Bernadin indeed was dead or had forgotten her, she felt that for this one night at least she should be satisfied! Not in a seventh heaven of intoxicated success, as that little ballet-dancer of ten years ago had been. She was much too heavily weighted to mount so high now. But in a state as nearly approaching contentment as was possible for her: well dressed, jewelled,

surrounded by admiration, in a good and honourable position, and with no more startling danger than usual, of having all these things—her gods—wrested from her.

But as the opera progressed, and while Mrs. Bryanstone's box was thronged with other men, no St. Georges appeared. He was to have arrived from Paris by the train that reached Brussels at six, and to have joined her at the theatre. That he was not there early did not surprise her. She understood St. Georges' nature well enough to feel that he would not have waited on an empress before going through an elaborate toilette and dinner after his journey. But when the last act was drawing to a close, and it was borne in upon her for certain that the count was not coming, her heart began to contract strangely. She had received a note from him that morning, in which he had spoken of his return as certain. What could have made him stay? Was treachery possible?—double treachery: he and Bernadin joining issue as they found her husband on the right track, and deciding to bring their information, while it was

yet saleable, to Bryanstone himself. Great God! at this moment they might be with him, repeating that history which, detail by detail, word by word, she had so often rehearsed to herself, just as she *felt* it must some day reach his ear.

What madness had made her ever give St. Georges the clue to her relation with Bernadin? In reading trials in newspapers she had often noticed how criminals, by some special act of folly of their own, will make over the very certainty of their detection into the hands of justice; had noticed and smiled over such weakness. And now had she not done literally the same? If St. Georges was her accomplice, was he not also her most implacable enemy? Would he leave a stone unturned to get her further in his power? If Bernadin lived, would he content himself with simply ascertaining the fact and never seek to reap benefit to his own pocket through this fresh witness against herself?

Mrs. Bryanstone fevered as she thought of these things: fevered in the midst of all the success and admiration which, a short half-hour before, she had hugged herself as possessing.

The shame of nobler natures, self-disdain, was unknown to her; but she was keenly, bitterly alive to the ever-impending risk of being shamed in the eyes of others. It needed no very vivid imagination, no very refined sensitiveness, to enable her to picture and recoil from the horror of that!

How if she should return to-night and find Bryanstone's door closed against her? If to-morrow all this glittering world of men and women should look upon her as an outcast?

Every living being, probably (however else we differ), has this in common: he desires only what seems to him to be good. The sweetness of man's blood to the tiger; the absence of a hated person to the murderer; the warmth and softness of your velvet chair before the fire to the terrier cold and wet out of the street; the extirpation of heresy to a fanatic; the winning of heaven to the monk in his barren cell; an ideal good, whether patiently yearned after or rudely snatched, is certainly the motive power in all. Dresses, diamonds, a fine house, an old name, made up Honoria's ideal of good. The

means by which they were to be got affected her with neither pleasure nor pain, any more than the mute agony of his victim's eyes affects the tiger, or the smutching of your velvet chair the terrier. And sitting there in her satin and pearls, and thinking that some day she might have to dress in shabby silks again, she would just have signed the death-warrants of Stretton, St. Georges, and Bernadin with as little sense of guilt as you and I feel when we brush away the flies that disturb our afternoon *siesta*, or strike down (and so leave to die a dozen lingering deaths) the wasp that settles on our plate of fruit.

Would. And how powerless, in reality, she was; how the sense of her own impotence fretted her; how inane were the compliments of all these men she was smiling on; how desperately she longed to get out in the open air and act, drive to St. Georges' lodgings (for so, in his note, he had bade her do in the event of his not appearing at the theatre); anything rather than remain longer in inaction, in suspense.

Half-a-dozen men were waiting to escort Mrs. Bryanstone when she prepared to leave her box.

She accepted the arm of a very withered, very ugly little Russian prince, but with whom she would rather have been seen than with the handsomest or cleverest untitled man in Europe; and when, radiant with well-imitated smiles and *empressement*, his highness was being permitted to adjust her cloak over her shoulders, she turned and glanced round the house to be sure that all her English friends were noticing her last success.

I have said that, for some caprice or other, her cheeks were left of their natural hue that night. Had they been an inch thick in enamel, I think the pallor which came over her face at this moment must have betrayed itself. The curtains of the stage-box opposite her own, which had been closely drawn all the evening, were withdrawn; and there, half hidden in shadow, and intently watching her, stood—Anthony Stretton! No need of a second glance; no matter that his dress was a disguise; that he moved away in an instant. Their eyes had met, and she knew him. The little prince made tender remarks about her health as he begged her to wrap her cloak more

closely round her, and she smiled in his face as she answered, and all the Anglo-Brussels world prophesied that that would be the next flirtation, and then his highness led her out through the crowd, and she felt the cold night air on her face, and saw people getting into their carriages, and remembered she must do the same, and go—where? Home? No, to St. Georges' lodgings, where Stretton, for aught she could tell, would follow! And as she stood there, thinking these things, and waiting for her carriage to come up, she clasped the prince's arm so closely, and answered his pretty attempts at love-making in so singular a voice, that his highness felt really almost frightened at the rapid progress made by his own charms.

“Home? yes, home, of course. To the Hôtel des Pays Bas.” The little Russian stood for a minute, and watched the carriage, as Mrs. Bryanstone drove away. It was bright moonlight; and he was able distinctly to track it across the Place de la Monnaie and down the Lonuge Rue Neuve immediately opposite. Was there an accident that the carriage slackened its

pace so abruptly? No, Mrs. Bryanstone must have checked the driver; for at the same moment she put her head out of the window, evidently to speak to him, and then the carriage stopped, came back a few yards towards the Place de la Monnaie, and turned into one of the smaller streets leading towards the Faubourg du Jardin Botanique.

Another man standing close beside the prince was watching this pantomime, too; and as he watched, a suppressed English oath broke from his lips. A minute later, a dark figure glided across the moonlit Place; and then with stealthy, rapid pace turned into the narrow side street Mrs. Bryanstone had taken.

The carriage was still in sight. And with an oath louder spoken and coarser than the last, Anthony Stretton swore to follow it to its destination.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW SOME PEOPLE HAVE TO LIVE.

IN the year eighteen hundred and forty —— ; more than a dozen years before Henry Bryanstone's marriage, two children, a boy and a girl, first made each other's acquaintance in the coulisses of one of the poorest little theatres in Paris. They looked upon themselves as "artistes," and in a certain sense they were so ; the boy, who was a model of beauty, and small of his age, filling the part of acrobatic Cupids in those representations peculiar to French taste termed "féeries ;" the girl, a hungry-looking, melancholy child of thirteen, a "rat" in theatrical parlance, receiving twenty sous a night for clasping her arms above her head, and oscillating from one leg to the other, in the choruses of the ballet—such ballet as it was.

Now, in theatres, as in most other mixed human societies, children of this particular sort of age—old enough to remark everything, and set everybody by the ears—are looked upon as a downright plague by all grown up men and women : and to this rule these two “ artistes ” I speak of were no exception ; the boy especially. With his angelic, infantine face, his soft tongue, his pretty little graceful gestures, this child, Jacques — no one ever knew of his having another name—possessed the most precociously wicked heart conceivable. Men and women ; the women most, trembled at the malignant, the diabolical sarcasms that used to flow from those childish lips. No kindness won upon him ; no sense of gratitude was in his nature. Having once found what delicious zest there is in being feared, he used his weapons unsparingly. As long as the manager was his friend, he knew that he might brave the subordinates with impunity. And the manager was not likely to turn against him. First, because he got his services and lovely face for nothing ; secondly, because the child was a useful spy and

eavesdropper among his adult confrères. The father of Jacques, one of the stage-carpenters, had been killed by an accident in the theatre. Of his mother no one ever heard. He had not a relation or friend, save the manager, in the world. His education, ever since he remembered anything, had been received in the dark regions of this fifth-rate theatre, and before this of others where his father worked, and on the Paris streets.

No wonder, some people would say, that at twelve years of age he was—what he was. For myself, I should doubt whether education or absence of education, can change the normal structure of any living creature. Vitiating and stunted, no doubt, must have been the moral growth of any child brought up in such an atmosphere as this; still, in ninety-nine children out of a hundred, equally situated, you would, I think, have found, at twelve years of age, some place for human affection; some capacity, at least, for the love that had never fallen to their lot. Jacques was stone to the core of his little worthless character. Beautiful in person,

keen in intellect, but with the whole moral nature—all that we think of when we say soul or heart—a blank. He would have been the same if he had been a prince; although a different education might have developed a different description of evil out of him; but—

A crime will do
As well, I reply, to serve for a test
As a virtue, golden through and through.

There were as good hearts in that poor troupe of actors as in any palace. Women among those not-at-all-honoured coryphées who would have been as tender to a forlorn little child as any titled maid of honour of them all. And Jacques would have none of them. Friendship was not his *métier*. Bred in a palace, he might of course have grown up to be a black-guard on a grand and princely scale; bred in the green-room of a fifth-rate Paris theatre, he grew up, through successive stages, to be a Chevalier d'Industrie, and the Count St. Georges!

Of the girl who was his companion; not so

much from friendship as from simple necessity, the two children being of the same age, and consequently thrown upon each other for companionship; I need say little here. Like many girls who grow handsome three or four years later, she was actually plain at thirteen; thin, pale, freckled; and with only even little white teeth, and a mass of perfectly golden hair, to give promise for the future. Except when Jacques implicated her in any of his *diablieries*, she had not a bad character in the theatre. A certain hard selfishness withheld her from being liked; but she was punctual and orderly in such small matters as concerned herself; painstaking; and, as a rule, averse to appropriating other people's property — virtues not without weight in any section of society. As far as friends or relations went, she was believed to be no better off than Jacques. Like him she was an orphan; her mother having died when the girl was ten or twelve years of age, her father two years later. He was an Englishman, and it was said at the theatre, a gentleman by birth; but the girl was taciturn on the subject

of her parentage, and the manager, after the custom of managers, mysterious as to the way in which any of his young pupils came into his hands.

Her first intimacy with Jacques lasted more than two years, during which period they quarrelled, furiously, about three times in every week, and still came together again, and made holiday in common, poor little wretches! on the succeeding Sunday. At the end of that time the manager of the theatre happening to become obnoxious in the eyes of the Parisian police, he thought it well to accept the post of ballet-master at one of the smaller theatres in Vienna, and offered to take Mademoiselle Nita with him as his pupil, which offer the child, young as she was, thought it to her interest to close with. When Jacques saw her next, four years later, she was dancing in the principal *rôle* of the ballet at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin: with half Paris at her feet.

And Jacques himself? Well, the handsome little acrobat had not entirely been misappreciated by the world, either. When he was

about seventeen years old the widow of a rich Havanna merchant, a woman double his own age fell in love with the young actor's handsome face, and, a much more unusual accident, resolved to marry him.

Monsieur Jacques, young as he was, had not a character to resist any overtures that might be made to him in the shape of money. He worshipped his mature and swarthy inamorata as fervently as if she had been a girl of his own age; was established by her in an apartment, Rue de Rivoli; applied himself with wonderful aptitude to fencing, dressing, smoking, drinking, gambling, and all other necessary accomplishments for a young gentleman of fortune, for more than two years; and at the end of that time, was once more cast, penniless, upon the world. His patroness, who was not without gastronomic as well as amative tastes, dying of a *salmi* the very week before Jacques, now calling himself the Count St. Georges, was to have become her husband.

What was to be his next step in life? he ques-

tioned himself, looking round upon the pretty apartment in which his friend had installed him ; the furniture of which, with the clothes he wore, two very showy screws, a portrait of Madame, and several dozens of champagne, constituted the whole of his worldly possessions. To return to the hard work and scanty wages of his old profession would have been abhorrent to him, after leading for two years the life of a count, for which he believed nature originally designed him. But what other means of support were open to him ? He would, possibly, have been willing to take a situation and work honestly in it. But how find one ? A handsome face, natural grace of manner, premature proficiency in *écarté*—as indeed in all other games of chance—and an early training as a rope-dancer, are not qualifications to get a lad on towards honest promotion in Paris more than elsewhere. In short, without will or act of his own, St. Georges was an adventurer at nineteen ; and with that natural instinct which, I fear, is a rudimentary idea, or inchoate tendency, in all men who know the honest paths of life to be shut against them, re-

solved that, as society would make no use of him, he would do his best to make use of society. He knew numbers of men who got credit with no more ostensible means than play and betting, and generally employing the pockets of their friends. Handsome, clever, young, and "*lancé*"—the first great point for a Parisian adventurer to overcome—could he not still continue to keep his apartment and his showy screws, and wear lovely neck-ties and kid-gloves, and command the glances of pretty women in the Bois and at the Opera? All the things that in St. Georges's (relative) state of innocence made up his sum of earthly ambition and enjoyment.

He tried the experiment, and for a time succeeded tolerably in keeping his creditors at bay. For a time : then came a day on which, as by horrible accord, his wine-merchant, his tailor, his landlord, all pressed their claims at once. A day on which some of his dearest friends forgot to call ; and others who did call could only regret their profound inability to lend him money. And now St. Georges looked starvation in the face again ; and asked himself, as honest lansquenets

and écarté would not support a man, what would?

De Lorient and Marcus were men who *lived* by play; but then De Lorient and Marcus were men whom the young fellows he lived among, and St. Georges himself till now, had looked upon with more than mistrust. Well, no matter; they lived. Marcus was starting just now for Vichy, and had more than once already invited him, St. Georges, to accompany him. Evidently, the man recognised superior ability in him to desire to have him as a companion; and, sharper or no sharper, it was certainly better to live at Marcus's expense for a few weeks than to starve, virtuously, in Paris. The baths were excellent places, he knew, for meeting with wealthy women of all nations. With his handsome face, a successor, in some shape, to the Havanna widow was tolerably certain to arise. And he went.

Two months later his creditors consented to arrange with him for a third of their claims; next winter St. Georges had a charming little establishment in Paris; was a recognised authority

in everything, from neck-ties to prima donnas ; had a crest on his plate ; family miniatures on his walls ; and an ancestor who was killed beside Henri Quatre at the battle of Ivry.

What paid for all this ? His friend Marcus had never done so badly as during this particular season ; and St. Georges, with the best will in the world, had had no opportunities of launching forth in his new career. But temptation to a deeper dishonour than card-sharping had fallen across his path. On the day when he and Marcus decided that it was fruitless for them to remain longer at Vichy, a young Mexican, whom St. Georges knew by name, the niece of his first benefactress, appeared with her husband at the baths. He introduced himself in the name of his beloved Maritana ; was received kindly, invited to the hotel ; wormed himself into the confidence both of husband and wife ; and a few weeks later had received a set of diamonds, worth seven or eight thousand francs, and an agonised promise of future payment, from the latter. All the letters of his departed Maritana, letters containing family secrets of all kinds, had fallen into his

hands on the day she died, and of this precious repository, the diamonds of the young Mexican, paid, not to conceal her own but another's guilt, were the first fruits.

A man who has once sunk to an action like this—an action that the moral code of men of all opinions and classes alike brands as vile—never retrogrades by a single step. From the day on which he made his first “coup” in Vichy to the present, St. Georges’ life had been one long list of infamies too trite, too pitiful to dwell upon. Had he succeeded? Do such men ever succeed? Must not ambition, wherein lies the very germ of all success, perforce be dead in a man whose bread depends upon his remaining nameless? whose greatest triumph can last only until he is found out? who, at his brightest time, will say to the friend or Laïs of the moment, “Let me eat and drink—for to-morrow the police!”

St. Georges thought he had got on pretty well altogether. If he had to live over again, he was quite sure he would have rather done as he had done than remain an acrobat. His digestion and appetite were excellent; he had visions still of set-

ting himself in marriage ; or perhaps some day keeping a third-rate gambling-house in Paris. Taking the word "success" in its abstract rather than conventional sense, he had possibly gone as near it as a great number of persons whom the world agrees in considering successful. He was un-haunted, at least, by the sense of failure, either present or future ; and I fancy very few of our greatest heroes are ever so successful as to be able to say much more than that.

All that *we* call success : the good-will of better men than ourselves ; the sense of hard-won victory over evil ; the prospect of peaceful honour in old age ; St. Georges knew nothing of. How should he ? What does his prototype, the little city Arab, rearing his palaces of mud in a corner of his own alley, know of the beautiful possessions, the picture-books, the rocking-horses, the waxen-women, that make Belgravian children happy ?

However freed from the exigencies of commonplace respectability in most things, there is one law to which gentlemen of the Count St. Georges' profession are as inexorably enslaved as though they were barristers expecting briefs, or sur-

geons, broken limbs. They must keep up an appearance. St. Georges' very existence depended upon his credit ; and to credit the slightest oncoming symptom of economy is fatal. On the same footing as he started his establishment in any place he must hold it to the end. To have put down his brougham, when he had once started a brougham, would have been as suicidal a step for him as for a struggling dentist to replace his boy in buttons by a maid-of-all-work.

At different times, and under different reverses of fortune, the Count had gone through personal privations which, in another cause, would have been heroic. He had committed petty basenesses without number ; had sold his friends ; had sold himself. But, since the first day on which he found himself an adventurer, launched upon the great Paris world, until now, he had never, even by his worst enemies, been accused of retrenchment. Once or twice he had smashed utterly : that is a thing that not unfrequently happens to young men of family : had smashed, disappeared ; and then, after a lapse of time, had arranged with his creditors,

and risen, Phoenix-like—valet, brougham, stall at the opera, and all—out of the ashes of his own dishonoured bills. But on each occasion he had “kept up” to the last : serene in countenance, perfect in dress, until the hour when he had no longer a meal to eat.

“*La garde meurt, mais ne se rend pas,*” is an axiom not to be appropriated exclusively to the use of honest men.

Brussels was not a city in which the same style of living was necessary, as was necessary in Paris or Vienna. All that St. Georges pretended to at present was a modest but thoroughly comfortable bachelor’s life. His own personal appliances, of course ; his perfumes, his cambric, coronetted handkerchiefs ; his immaculate gloves as in Paris ; but for his ménage, a small suite of apartments on a first floor in the best boulevard of the town ; and his Parisian servant, a greater rogue if possible than himself, and whose wages were exorbitant, but who served him at once as valet, butler, and cook. A first-class Parisian cook was a simple necessity to him. On occasion he could appease his

hunger, like a wild animal, on the coarsest fare of the commonest cabaret. He would no more, "with his head above water," have subjected himself to the greasy abominations of third-rate French restaurants in Brussels, than he would have drank champagne (like an Englishman) with his meat, or have gone without fresh violets on his dressing-table in spring. When he was down he disappeared,—sank, as only Frenchmen of his type do sink, into fierce and abject misery, into squalor and rags at once. The moment he rose to the surface, all the little graceful luxuries of life became absolute necessities to him again. He could exist, like the chrysalis, underground; he could live, like a butterfly, in the sun. But his constitution, moral as well as bodily, seemed unfitted for any intermediate or transitional state.

When Honoria entered his apartment, noiselessly and discreetly ushered in by Monsieur Adolphe, whose well-bred face betrayed not the faintest look of surprise at such a visitor, the first thought that struck her was the luxury in which this man lived. Her great objects of life

were, in the main, the same as his ; the pleasures which each took, or sought to take, out of daily life, were, perforce, different ; and it struck Mrs. Bryanstone vividly at this moment by how much the Count, simply because he was a man, she a woman, had the best of it. The most trivial, like the highest enjoyment she was capable of, was still dependent upon others ; the envy of women, the admiration of men. St. Georges was happy in himself ; in the mere daily gratification of his own sensuous nature. And in this kind of enjoyment, so long as the means of supplying it last, there is no admixture, as there always must be in every one of a woman's successes, either of disappointment or of failure.

The odour of flowers and of wines reached her as soon as she entered the Count's ante-chamber, a small, long-shaped room, hung round with admirable copies in Gobelin tapestry of some of Le Sueur's most celebrated designs ; for the Count was "un peu artiste," and exacting in everything about him that pertained to art. The remains of a small and exquisite dessert stood

upon a round table in the centre of the luxurious, velvet-hung dining-room, through which Monsieur Adolphe next ushered her ; but it was in the third room of the apartment, the room that a woman would have called her boudoir, a man, his sanctum, that the Sybarite tastes of St. Georges showed themselves to the full. Had it been fitted up by loving hands for a bride, more minute care could not have been showed in its arrangements. Silken curtains, relieved with festoons of Alençon lace ; luxurious divans ; on the buhl dressing-table ivory-fitted brushes, perfumes, trinkets innumerable ; these were the objects on which the first gains of a man who, six weeks before, was literally starving, had been lavished. Bouquets of violets—he could not exist without flowers—made the air heavy with their sweetness ; and as Honoria entered, the flame of a piled wood-fire, joined with the subdued light of wax-candles (for I need scarcely tell you a man like the Count disdained gas) threw a voluptuous rose-colour over all.

The Count St. Georges was lying outstretched upon a divan beside the hearth, smoking a

Turkish pipe, his eyes half-closed as the wreaths of silver smoke curled up lazily from his lips. He was dressed in a wrapper of brocaded purple silk ; and by his side, on a little inlaid table, stood a bottle of some amber-coloured liqueur, and one tiny glass. I have already said that St. Georges was handsome ; he was more than handsome ; his face had developed into nobler beauty than even the little artiste of a dozen years before had promised. For the strict purposes of poetical justice, handsome villains should be invariably spoilt by a sinister expression about their eyes. No such obliquity, to tell the truth, occurred in St. Georges. He had handsome iron-blue eyes, deeply set, and with any expression whatsoever that he chose to throw into them ; a Grecian nose and mouth, even and snow-white teeth, a splendid tawny-brown beard, and short-cut ebon hair. His brow was broad and full of thought ; his head modelled not alone in accordance with the requirements of art, but of phrenology. No undue development of the lower qualities, no depression of veneration and benevolence. For the rest, his figure was

strongly knit, and, for a Frenchmen, tall—five feet nine or ten ; his hands and feet, as well shaped as though all the old blood of the Faubourg St. Germain flowed in his veins.

But neither the sight of his luxury nor of his handsome person appeared to have a very softening effect upon Mrs. Bryanstone. Throwing off her ermined opera-cloak, she walked up to the Count's side, and exclaimed, without an attempt at any commonplace salutation, "Well, what have you done? Is he dead? You seem to have forgotten, I think, that I sent you an errand, and that you have not delivered your answer."

"Forgotten?" and the Count looked up at her without rising; "oh, no, I have not; I never forget anything."

"You were to come to the theatre to tell me; that is all."

"And after I had dressed and dined, the fire and my pipe over-tempted me to stop at home, and I succumbed, as you see. I knew it wasn't a matter of such life and death that it wouldn't keep till to-morrow; also, that if you really

wanted to see me you would, as I advised you, come to my house. And I was right."

He raised his pipe to his lips, took a long, deliberate inhalation of its fragrant contents, then emitted a volume of blue smoke that for a moment almost shut out his handsome, insolent face from Honoria's sight.

"And Bernadin lives, and you have seen him!" she cried, but in the quiet, concentrated tone that with her denoted rising passion, "and have compared notes, and agreed probably at what price you will sell me? You may as well tell me truth,—I mean as near the truth as it's possible for your tongue to come. I know by your insolence that you have betrayed me."

"Madame, if you know so much, and believe me so little," he answered, quietly, "what use is there in my speaking?"

She turned away, and took one or two quick impetuous turns up and down the room, while the Count still continued to smoke, with imperturbable good temper, and with half-closed eyes. At last she stopped, just before the dressing-table, and for a minute seemed to examine

with interest its childish profusion of magnificent toys.

“Jacques,” she exclaimed, abruptly, “you value all this?” and with a disdainful sweep of her hand she took in the whole voluptuous adornment of the little room. “For toys like this, for liqueurs, for Turkish tobacco—above all, to be thought not the child of the people you are, but an atisto, born to such things—for all this you would sell your soul, if you had one. Well, how do you pay for it? As little as you can, of course. Still, for a great deal you must pay; and, above all, you must have credit. How do you pay? Something out of the money you win at cards, doubtless. But lansquenet is uncertain, and pigeons are not always forthcoming for piquet and écarté. Your second grand resource—I don’t know that I shouldn’t put it first—is by getting bribes of silence out of women. Don’t speak, sir—don’t answer till I have done.” He had put down his pipe now, and risen to his feet, confronting her. “You know that this is true of you. Among a circle of men like yourself—of the greatest black-

guards in the world, that is to say—you pick up a word here, and a hint there, and then put all you have heard together, with the genius of scoundrelism that I allow you to possess, and traffic upon it. Deny it, if you can! What but abject fear made that wretched girl at Vichy first give you the money that launched you upon the Parisian world?"

"I have had precious little money of yours, at all events," he answered, between his teeth. "You had better confine yourself to your own affairs, madame."

"Money? No, you have not had much money, in gold or bank notes; that's not the way that I am to pay you! An introduction in London is to be the price of your silence in my case. First in Paris, then in Vienna, then in half-a-dozen of the other capitals of Europe, the Count St. Georges' handsome face and matchless rascality have met with success. In no London drawing-room, or London club, has he been able to set his foot. He went there once, but found that one or two friends who had noticed him at Baden, and even in Paris, quite

forgot him in Regent Street; and after hanging about for a time in the purlieus of Leicester Square——”

“Nita!” he interrupted, a sullen glow rising in his eyes, “this kind of conversation is childish, and in the worst possible taste. Let us quit it, if you please, and return to business.”

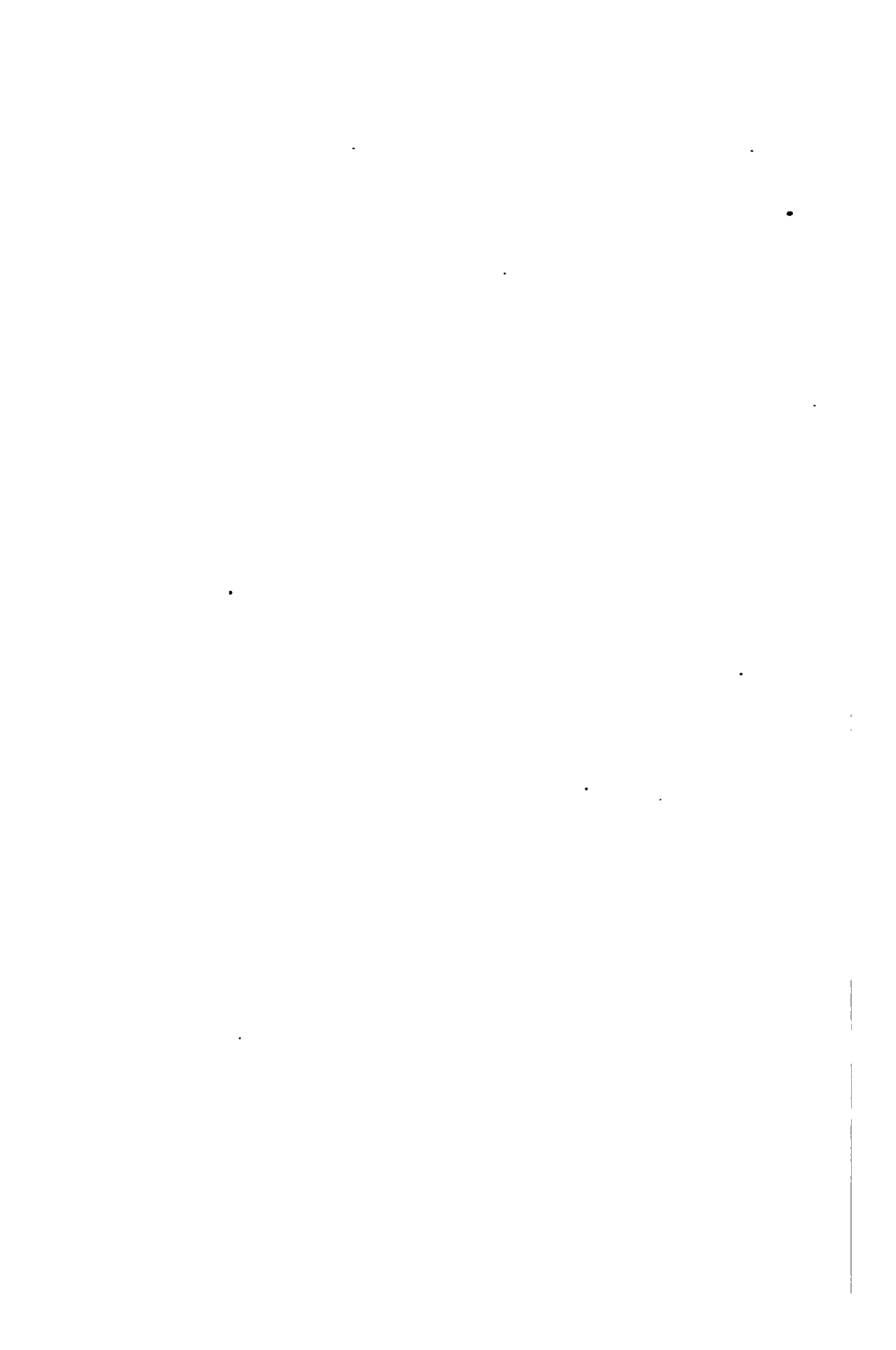
“Business!” she echoed, bitterly; “as if I would talk to you of anything but business! as if I am wasting all this breath for any other end than to bring your own wretched interest as strongly before you as I can! Poor, unknown, starving, the Count St. Georges was, I repeat, one day in an eating-house in Leicester Square; not eating, for he had no longer a twenty-sous piece that he could call his own, but desperately searching for some stray victim—perchance some old acquaintance to beg a dinner out of—when chance threw him across the very object to serve him best—a woman concerning whose past life he possessed a secret, and who to a certain extent was in his power. You remember the sequel, Count? Heaven, what a dinner I gave you! With what a

famished appetite, like a starved hound, you ate it !”

He sprang up, and grasped her wrist fiercely ; the last human feeling he had—pride—goaded to the uttermost. “Take care what you do,” he said, in a hoarse whisper ; “if you say another word of this, I’ll go to your husband to-night, I swear it, and betray you !—betray you, mind, as I couldn’t have done a week ago, even if I had wished it. Bernadin has told me all !”

END OF PART IX.

PART X.



CHAPTER V.

THE FOOTSTEPS IN THE STREET.

HONORIA's hand fell nerveless from his clasp ; the heavy moisture gathered, in a second, round her whitening lips. "And Bernadin is coming here?" she gasped: "is here, in Brussels, now? Tell it me out—speak! I—I'm not afraid of you," rallying, like the lioness she was, before danger; "I can brave you all—Bernadin, St. Georges, Stretton—and defy you! Unless you're afraid, speak! Where is he?"

St. Georges looked at her with the sort of feeling, half-fear half-admiration, that the very vilest men are sensible of for sheer physical pluck like hers.

"Bernadin is not here, madame," he answered, after a moment's pause; "Bernadin is not coming here, unless summoned by me. That

he remembers you with no particular love you may believe. But he is a sensible man, well in with the government, and not at all anxious to reopen any old scandal respecting his own, or—or *his wife's* history. Let us imitate his example, madame: let us be discreet. Can anything be more childish than for old friends to lose their tempers, and use harsh words as we did just now?"

Honorina broke away from him, and took one rapid turn up and down the room, then she came back to his side. "You are right," she said, in a softened voice; "hard words are useless. If I used them, 'twas but to show you more plainly the position you and I stand in; the good and the ill we may still get out of each other. Whatever else I am, I am not mean, Jacques. When I first got into Mrs. Forsyth's service, I tried my best to get rid of you; so much I say openly: had letters written telling you of my death, and hoped fervently never to have seen your face again. That was simply for my own preservation. In what underhand way have I ever sought to injure

you? I may have taunted you just now with your poverty; but when I saw you poor and miserable in London, I liked you—you know I did—better than if I'd met you at the height of one of your greatest successes. I don't know why—there's no good in me: it isn't that—but I do like a man best when he's down, and his coat's in rags, and his face white with want. If I'd ever loved any one, which I've not, it would have been a man at such a pass; and then I believe I would have given up a house and name, and everything else, to go and work for him,—'till I got tired of it all! I behaved very well to you that day; I sat with you while you dined, bore with your sullenness and your threats, told you my name and everything about me, and took twenty pounds from the lining of my dress for you on the spot. Oh, I know what your look means! It was to my interest to do all this. Granted; but I did it as few women would have done—with a good grace. I was as glad to sit with you there, in your ragged coat, as if you had been a duke. I didn't merely give you money, but advice; organised this little

plant for you here in Brussels, wrote a letter of introduction for you on the spot — everything. And you have succeeded! It is six weeks since I met you: look what you were then, and what you are now."

"I know, I know," he interrupted, somewhat sullenly, and re-lighting his chibouk: "where's the good of making so much of all this?"

"Simply that you may see the wisdom of working with me, the utter folly of going against me, Jacques. I'm not afraid, as I told you. Summon Bernadin here; betray me, one or both of you, and the day after I lose honour, name, money — all that I hold now, I'll take up something else — and make it pay, probably! I don't fail very often. But where would you be? What would you have to show as winnings on your game? A hundred pounds or so, if you bargained well, and had not had your head broken while you were telling your story, which is more than likely, and then an end of everything! A complete case, in short, of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs! Now, by acting with

me," she glanced into his face rapidly, "with me and against all the rest—against Bernadin, Stretton, Bryanstone—look where you will be! The—the story Bernadin told you is one very difficult to prove: impossible, I may say, if it is to rest upon his own word alone. Only two other people in the world could possibly identify me, you and ——"

"And who besides? What do you stop for, Nita? No one is listening to you here."

"But some one is walking up and down under your window: I'm sure of it. I have heard the same step for the last half-hour."

"And what of it?" said the Count: "you are not getting superstitious, I hope, madame? You, with your magnificent constitution, to be haunted by ghosts already!"

"By ghosts? no," she answered, with a strange smile; "but by *revenants* of flesh and blood—Hush! wait quiet a minute, and it will return. No, for the first time, it has not. It was nothing, perhaps, after all——by *revenants* of flesh and blood, yes. Whom do you think I saw in the theatre to-night? You would never

guess. Stretton : the only man whom, besides Bernadin, we have to fear."

"What! *the* Stretton!" he exclaimed: "the banker's clerk?"

"The Anthony Stretton of Frankfort," she answered, with a laugh. "You needn't look so incredulous: I never mistook a face yet. I saw him clear, as I was leaving my box; and he saw me, and knew that I recognised him. Jacques, in such a pass as this, would you not be mad to abandon me? If my story is indeed a marketable article—which I doubt—do you think a wretch like this will not coin whatever profit is to be made by its sale? For what else is he here? For what was he watching me to-night? Jacques," she went on, almost passionately, and clasping her hand suddenly upon her companion's, "Stretton must never be allowed to speak: do you hear me? My ruin and yours will follow if Stretton comes across Mr. Bryanstone. It is the evidence that that coward I told you of—the Englishman, Farnham Lumley—has already from fear been forced to retract. Evidence blacker far than Bernadin's wild story.

You'll help me, wont you? Stretton must never speak."

The Count shifted himself away from her touch, and stood irresolute. From the dead, unbroken silence of the street came the muffled sound of the footsteps again, close beneath his windows; and the fancy struck him suddenly that they might be the footsteps of Stretton—of the man who was not to be allowed to speak! Without one spark of honour, without a glimmering of the commonest rudimentary honesty; with a heart insensible to love, to gratitude, to human affection of any kind—St. Georges' feet had never yet approached that one dark path from which the mere animal instinct of the vilest shrinks. He had once by unfair play ruined a lad, who blew his brains out the next morning, and had eaten his breakfast quietly while they told him of the event: he had extorted money from numberless victims by threats of exposure worse than death; had carried these threats mercilessly into execution in such cases as he had not received his stipulated hush-money. From any direct personal violence, from any

attempt, even in thought, upon the sanctity of another human being's life, want of temptation, or his weaker nature, or perchance some vague perception in this, if in nothing else, of good, had kept him free.

"Give the man money again, and let him go," he said, without meeting his companion's eye. "I'm not given to sentiment, but you *ought* to deal mercifully with him. He was an honest lad enough till we took him in hand, and in less than three weeks he was ruined! Don't hit him hard, now; you'll pull through without that, Nita. I only spoke of Bernadin as I did to frighten you. He believes you to be dead: I took good care of that, you may be sure."

She looked steadily into his face for some seconds. "Jacques," she remarked, at length, "I hope you are telling the truth,—mind, for your own sake I hope it; just as for Stretton's sake I wish he had not come across me again. Look me in the eyes—so!—and tell me what your interview with Bernadin was like. I shall know if you lie by one syllable; and for yourself, and

your own safety, I repeat this piece of advice to you—tell the truth.”

“Why should I tell you anything but the truth?” answered the Count; but he turned away uneasily from her gaze. “What interest have I in forging lies about this man Bernadin? You gave me a clue to finding him in Paris. I found him; and with enormous dexterity contrived, while pretending to be interested in a totally different affair, to bring in Honoria Forrester’s name.”

“And he answered,” she interrupted, hurriedly, “he answered—what? Go on: I want no preamble of yours.”

“He answered,” replied St. Georges, “by a string of such curses as I never before heard bestowed by any human being in my life. ‘You know her!’ he said, at last—Heavens, in what a voice!—‘you know whether that woman still lives or not?’ I answered that you were dead: that you had been mixed up in the history and the ruin of some of my intimate friends in London—for I thought this at once made my story sound life-like—and to my certain know-

ledge had died of decline, the family complaint, nearly a year ago."

"Go on."

"There is little more to say. Supposing that I had known the whole family story, which I did not, Monsieur Bernadin told me sufficient of his old love affairs, and *of his marriage*, to make me see that my best wisdom lay in remaining taciturn. An over-anxious word or look might have aroused his suspicions respecting me; but I managed him, as I told you, with my habitual adroitness, and even got out of him—my poor little Nita! here is the crowning point that I have been keeping back from you so long—even got out from him the excellent piece of news, that he himself is going to leave Europe! On the thirtieth of this present month of March, Monsieur Bernadin sails from London for Algeria, where he is appointed one of the chiefs of police, and will remain, unless he happily dies of fever at once, for years."

The blood rose into Mrs. Bryanstone's face.

"Jacques! do you swear all this?" she cried.

"Bernadin going away for years! God! it is too good! and at this very moment, too!"

She moved aside: she hid her face away for a minute or two: then turned round, and smiled at him. "Something tells me you are not lying to me, Jacques: something stronger than reason, that I've been consulting for the last two minutes. When we were children, I always knew by a turn of your eyebrows when you were speaking truth or not; and I don't think your face has quite lost the old trick yet. At all events—perhaps because I see no better course," she put in lightly—"I do believe you. Stupid fool!—Bernadin, my friend, not you—so he curses me still, does he, for that poor little monkey trick I played him once? What a comedy it must have been to see you together! Is he changed, I wonder? Describe him. He was tolerably good-looking when I saw him last, three years and a-half ago."

"He was," the Count answered, "the most utter wreck of a man that it was possible to conceive. A man, probably not more than thirty, but bowed down like a man of eighty;

fearfully attenuated, and with strange premature patches of white mingled with his brown hair."

Honoriam listened to these details attentively, neither with an expression of pity nor of triumph, simply attentively; then shrugged her shoulders, supposed the air of Vincennes had not agreed with him, and fell back to talking of Stretton. "You are very charitable in your views," she remarked, when St. Georges had again suggested the expediency of buying him off; "but allow me to ask how you suppose I am to meet all these demands? For you, I say, as I said that day I saw you in London, I will do what I can, and as long as I can. Never mind why. Because we were starving children together once: because I have been your comrade only, never sickened by hearing a word of love from your lips: because, if you will, I fear you too much to refuse. 'To you I will keep my promise. To Stretton"—a singular veiled light shot across her eyes—"I will keep it too. When I bought him off, before my marriage, I told him it was for the last time. I warned him, as he valued his own life, never to come across my path

again. He has come across it, and the result be on his own head! I will not give him more money: he shall not make money by his knowledge elsewhere: I swear it."

"But give him time," said the Count, laying aside his pipe nervously, and with genuine agitation on his handsome, indolent face: "these sort of things are always to be avoided; and—and—the law, in short, and——"

"And if you are afraid, say so, and have done with it!" cried Honoria, with a laugh. "With your tragedy-airs you look as though I was going to kill Mr. Stretton with my own poor little hands." (They were not at all little. The Count glanced at them, even now, in their strong white muscular beauty, and shuddered.) "Of course I shall see him—of course I shall try to bring him to reason: and if he will go away quietly, so much the better for him. Make money by his information he shall not."

"And, supposing he will not go away," persisted St. Georges, who knew her too well not to understand the significance of those words, "how, in God's name! do you propose to stop

his mouth ? Madame, you have conducted affairs enough of this kind already. For a few idle words against you you get Molinos killed in a duel—that was no duel, *ma foi* !—the boy had never handled a sword six times in his life. As a simple matter of prudence you sold Bernadin, who had never wronged you, to worse than death. Be advised : such things are not repeated for ever with impunity.”

He was more agitated than she had ever seen him. His hand shook, the moisture stood thick around his lips.

“Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid, Count :” this was the answer. “You shall not be implicated, whatever I do. The guilt shall all rest upon my own shoulders. Guilt—what guilt ?” she interrupted herself fiercely. “If a man who has been warned puts his head into the cage of a tigress, is the guilt hers if he suffers ? What right, if you come to the high moralities, has Stretton to thrust himself across my life ? I met him once—years ago, and during the time I knew him his own weak nature led him into ruin. Does that time con-

stitute me—do these three weeks out of a year, dead and gone ages ago, constitute me his debtor for ever? I injured him, or so he thinks, and I've paid him since for the injury. We are more than quits. Let him take heed now of injuring me. It is a question, as far as I am concerned, of simple self-defence. I have struggled hard—not harder than young women of the world do—for a certain position, and have gained it, and will hold it at any cost, and, in my way, be true to it. Let Stretton, or any other man, beware, who seeks, unprovoked, to meddle with me or mine!”

She took her cloak, threw it round her shoulders, and held out her hand. “Good night, child, and please don't look so frightened! It quite spoils the *tableau* of the exquisite, calm, impassive Count St. Georges. To-morrow, if I can, I'll see you again, and we'll talk more about Bernadin and his wonderful communications to you. Good night.”

But St. Georges never saw her outstretched hand. Mrs. Bryanstone's exposition of her views concerning the “high moralities” had

affected his nerves to the last degree. In what did he differ so much from Anthony Stretton ? he asked himself. He had betrayed to her his knowledge of Bernadin's secret. What was to keep her from carrying out the pretty metaphor of the tigress in her cage with him ? for upon the sentimental memories of childhood and comradeship, St. Georges, I need hardly say, placed just as much reliance as they were worth. How could he know that all this open resolve against Stretton might not be a blind for some stealthy blow about to be dealt to himself ?

"Whatever you resolve upon, Nita, remember that I am your friend—your ally, if you like it better, and that I will stand by you in everything. Good night," and now he did take her firm, warm hand into his suddenly cold one. "Shall I see you home, or have you a carriage waiting ?"

"I have no carriage waiting, and you shall not see me home," said Honoria, cheerily. "Why, Jacques, do you think that I, Nita, am such an aristocrat already that I can't walk along a mile or so of quiet streets at midnight ?

I shall just run quick along the Rue de Marais, and at the corner of the Rue d'Or and the Rue de la Montagne take a *fiacre*, so as to arrive home in due state before the porter of the hotel. Good-bye, child, and don't let your fancy run away with dreams of ghosts and phantoms."

She glided away from his side, and in another minute St. Georges watched her cross the boulevard and turn down the corner of the street immediately opposite his house. The steps that in his fancy he had supposed to be Anthony Stretton's, were no longer to be heard.

CHAPTER VI.

A MIDNIGHT ALLIANCE.

THE deserted streets of Brussels were light as at noon-day under a brilliant winter moon. Drawing the hood of her opera-cloak over her head, Honoria commenced her walk with the quick firm tread, the quiet unconscious mien, that at such an hour, and alone, only a woman who is, or who has been, a daughter of the people can assume. A well-born woman might—by bare possibility, of course—find herself in precisely such a position as Honoria was now; but if you met her you would know her at once by the nervous haste, the cast-down face, the eyes that *would* turn, constantly, to see that none were following or watching. Honoria walked with step as firm, with head as erect as

any peasant-girl returning at sunset from the milking-field ; as simply ignorant of fear as she used to be when she was a half-starved child of fourteen running home along the Paris streets at midnight a dozen years before.

She had, in truth, far graver things to think of than occupy the minds of women who can remember to be frightened. Bernadin lived. Bernadin had told the story of his life, or the portion of it vitally concerning her, to St. Georges. What reliance was she to place upon the seeming good faith of the Count ? How could she know—was it even likely, she questioned herself, that he had made Bernadin believe in her death ?

Bernadin—Bernadin—the name seemed to echo through her brain till it was on fire. She remembered how once, in a certain moment of agony, Bernadin had said these, or like to these words : “ I will never forget you. I will live to betray you, as you have betrayed me.” Remembered the look, the tone, the gesture that accompanied them, as though it had been yesterday. He was no weak dupe to be led by his

own passions like Stretton : no dandy sybarite to be bought off with toys like St. Georges. Loyal, brave, true, Bernadin had twice been betrayed by her ; purely and wholly for her own convenience, and in cold blood. And her heart turned sick at the thought of what, if the hour ever came, the inexorable vengeance of such a man would be.

“ Fool, ever to have believed him dead ! ” she cried bitterly to herself. “ Fool, to have thought that a year or two of the worst dungeon in France could do more than blanch his hair and harden his pitiless heart ! And doubly, trebly fool now, if I believe that St. Georges has been faithful ! that Bernadin will leave England in a week ! Oh, that they had one life—all of them, and that for a moment I had a man’s arm, and might strike ! ”

She clenched her hand at that thought, and a passionate exclamation (of course in French ; the language in which she thought) left her lips.

“ Madame ! ” exclaimed a voice, and a man’s figure appeared suddenly out of a doorway

where, till now, it had been concealed in blackest shadow. "Rehearsing always! In your new life as a lady and an Englishwoman, keeping still, I perceive, to the old vulgar habits of the stage!"

"Anthony Stretton!" she answered, with admirable composure, and not swerving by an inch from her path. "Spying always! In spite of oaths and of bribes keeping true still to the vile instincts of all your miserable life! Where is the promise you gave me? Where is the warning that I was to have before you dared thrust yourself before my sight again?"

"Nita," answered Stretton, for it was he:—the Count's fancy had been a true one—"if I had found you any way but how I have found you, I'd have kept dark altogether. I swear it. I came back to England because, like the miserable unlucky devil I am! I lost all my money before I'd been in New York a month; and as soon as ever I was in London the old madness came on me again, and I said 'I must see her face, if I die for it.' If I had found you living quiet and respected with your husband, I swear to heaven

I'd not have molested you. I love you enough not to do that still ; and if I had felt I must get a word or two with you, I'd have written a line and warned you as I promised. Well, instead of that, what do I find ? ”

“What ? ” she echoed, stopping short ; she had continued her walk until now, and looking him fiercely in the face. “Am I not living ‘quiet and respected,’ as I think you called it, with my husband ? ”

“No, you're not,” he answered doggedly. “You've got him into trouble already—you see I've found out all about you, through sources of my own in London. He's been at death's door through fighting some duel your accursed face got him into ; and now, here, when you should be watching by the sick bed you brought him to, you're philandering after that scoundrel St. Georges again—curse him ! If you call this living quiet with your husband, I don't. I'm a blackguard, no doubt, as you've often told me, but I've my ideas on some points. If I'd found you going on steady and you'd have helped me, Nita, with a hundred or so again, I'd have kept

as quiet as you choose. But now that you've taken your course I shall take mine. You're not going to have husband and lover both, and the poor devil you brought to ruin kicking about the world without food to his mouth ! So much I swear to you."

For a minute Honoria was silent ; then she laid her hand softly upon the man's arm. "Anthony," she said, in a changed voice, "do you mean to say you still care enough for me to be jealous ?"

Her touch, her tone, the look of her face, softened as it was in the moonlight, thrilled through every fibre of Anthony Stretton's heart. "Do I care for you ? do I love you as madly as ever ?" he answered, seizing her hand and carrying it to his lips. "Why, Nita, I'd go round the world for you, and you know it ! I'd do anything you told me—lead any dog's life you willed, if you'd only let me think that some day—never mind when, years and years off, perhaps—you'd look at me again with any of the old kindness in your eyes !"

"Hush, hush !" she interrupted him, firmly

taking away her hand. "Speak low, and don't talk any of this kind of rubbish, for you know I never could, and never can stand it. I ask you, do you still care enough for me, as a friend, to be jealous? You answer 'yes.' Good. I ask you, next, will you do a service for me? Anthony," she went on after a minute's pause, "you have come at a strange time—a time when I am beset by enemies, when I don't know which way to turn for counsel! And, if you will, you can serve me."

Her voice faltered a little; the eyes whose syren beauty for so many years had haunted this man, swam with tears. "I will do anything for you," he answered unhesitatingly; "anything. I'm no soft boy now, as I was when you first knew me. Whom do you want out of your way this time? St. Georges—eh, Nita? Has St. Georges been false, and do you want to be revenged upon him at last?"

He rubbed his hands together excitedly; and a strange fire glittered in his great eyes. Involuntarily Honoria glanced down the silent street, and saw with relief that she was within

hail of two or three men who were standing beside a stand of fiacres.

“You are wrong—utterly wrong, Anthony. St. Georges never has been more than he is at this moment—the oldest comrade I have, the one human being who remembers my miserable childhood with me.”

“And with a comrade—a companion, you spend hours alone at this hour?” he broke out, fiercely. “Nita, take care how you lie to me! I tell you I’m no spoony boy now, as I was when you first saw and ruined me, but a desperate man, ready to commit any desperate action and bear the consequences. Do you hear the time?” As he spoke, the soft cathedral chimes were flooding the sleeping city with their pathetic record of another day’s death. “Midnight. I told you that from ten till midnight was the time I’d return when I did return, and, mark you! I’ve kept my promise. I’ve been watching for you all the time you were with him. When you first went in you walked up to his side and he got up—I saw the outline of his head against the blind and knew him—knew him? blast him!

wouldn't I know him out of a thousand ? Wasn't he at your side the first night I ever saw you at those accursed tables ? Well, it was nothing but a chance that kept me from going straight up to his room at that moment and putting an end to him—then and there. To him and to you too,—and mind, I'm equal to it !” He stretched out both of his arms threateningly towards her. “I've the strength of six men in me now, although I do look so ill and starved. But then I thought better of it, my poor Nita ! I love you too much still really to harm you, and I waited for you—and have got you !” He took her hand again, whether she willed it or not ; “have got you, and will do you no harm ! Only you know you must not, I say you must not, go near that scoundrel St. Georges again. If your husband does not look after you, I will. I won't leave you any more.”

He caught her unwilling hand to his lips, and kissed it—kissed it repeatedly, but more with the famished sort of affection of a dog fawning upon his newly-found master than that of a sane man towards the woman he loved. Honoria,

who, as he poured forth his last incoherent rage, had quietly managed to lead him another few paces down the street, saw with intense relief that the drivers on the cab-stand were already looking towards her companion and herself. Callous to danger as she was in all ordinary risks of life, there was a fire in Stretton's hollow eyes that thrilled her with sickening physical terror. A horrible foreboding overcame her that she had met with a strength greater than her own, at last. Lumley, St. Georges, Bernadin, were things of flesh and blood—men with human passions because with human reason still to work upon,—while *this* man!——

“Anthony,” she whispered softly, and looking him steadily, for so she remembered to have heard a madman should be looked, in the eyes, “to prove to you that you are wrong—to prove to you that instead of lowering myself to love St. Georges, I regard him, old comrade as he is, with extremest suspicion, shall I tell you what favour it is I'm going to ask of you?”

“To get him out of the way!” he exclaimed vehemently. “I knew it, I knew it! Well, I

won't ask why. I'll pretend to believe you. The handsome Count St. Georges is not your lover, never has been—but your friend, your comrade ; and I, Anthony Stretton, the despised fool you spurned so long, am to put him away for you ! When is it to be done, Nita ?” Sinking his voice to a whisper, “To-night ? I'm quite ready, quite. I know the house. I've spoken to the porter already, and he's an old man, and I'm strong. I've the strength of six men in me now. Shall it be to-night ? One word, or, if you don't like to say it, no word at all, and it shall be done. What does the law matter to me ? If the law took me it must take you. Isn't the person who plans a man's death accessory to it ? And we should die together ! My little Nita, I wouldn't care a rush for it—the rope, and the drop, and the quick-limed grave in the jail and all—if I thought *you'd* lie in the same bed with me at last ! that when you were cold and stiff, I, and no other man, should be near you ! Don't shiver, child. What should make you shiver ? I'll take care of you. I'll destroy your enemies. You shall

never want a friend again now that Anthony Stretton's come back."

He held both her hands in a grasp like iron, and gazed with a kind of rapture at her face. Had she obeyed her wild instinct of terror, she would have screamed for help, and probably by that act would have sealed her doom at once: for Stretton had now worked himself into the precise state of exaltation at which a madman would take the life of his mistress with the same feeling of tenderness with which a man possessed of reason would kiss her lips. But, even in a position that froze her blood with animal affright, Honoria could think still. "He will *not* injure me," these were the thoughts that passed across her brain, only with the clearness, the speed of lightning, very different to the clumsy translation of them into words. "Bryanstone would never judge me from a madman's ravings, even if he spoke, and, personally, the wretch likes me still. If I could only keep him like this! Keep him as a tool, as a watch upon St. Georges, till the danger of the next few days has passed!" And then

aloud, "Anthony," she said, "if you care for me still, if you wouldn't ruin me utterly, never use these violent words again. I don't want St. Georges to die. His life can serve me better than his death. What I do want is that he should be watched—that you should watch him, Anthony. Will you do this for me?"

"I will do what you bid me, but he would be better out of the way. Dead men tell no tales. If St. Georges were gone, mine would be the only tongue that could harm you; and I—I shall never harm you more. Never! I've gone back to the old days, Nita, when the chestnuts were in flower, and I used to walk with you in the Homburg gardens. Everyone turned to look at you as you passed. You were the handsomest woman there, and the wickedest; but it's all over now, or nearly over, and righteous and wicked 'll have to meet the judgment alike!"

"But Anthony, you wander," she cried, with a shudder impossible to repress. "We are not talking of old days, but present ones. I'm in horrible difficulty, as I told you; and by watch-

ing St. Georges closely during the next few days you can do me the greatest service. For the sake of what you once felt, won't you do this, Anthony? I'll like you better than I ever liked you yet if you will stand my friend?"

She turned away from him as though to hide her emotion; her voice trembled; she clasped her right hand over the one he held, in a piteous little gesture of entreaty. Anthony Stretton stood silent for two or three seconds: then he put her hands away from his, but gently, with none of the quick, convulsive movement that he had used to her before.

"Nita," he said at last, with singular calmness, "do I hear you aright? If I help you to the uttermost, obey you like a dog—like a slave, you'll ever come to like *me*, Anthony Stretton? Let me hear you say that again. I suppose I must be mistaken."

"No, you are not mistaken," she answered firmly. "If you stand by me, if you bring me through the danger I now run, I'll like you—well, I'll like you as much as it's in me to like anyone. Are you satisfied?"

"And you'll give up St. Georges?"

"Give him up? As an acquaintance, no. It would be impossible."

"But as a 'comrade' at whose lodgings you pay midnight visits, yes?"

"Yes. I will never visit the Count St. Georges again, if you wish it."

"Good. Now what do you desire me to do for you?" His tone was perfectly reasonable; his manner quiet, almost subdued. "You must tell me plainly, and I will obey you to the letter."

"What I want you to do is this," she answered, glancing quickly round her for an instant, and lowering her voice to a whisper. "For the next five days keep the Count St. Georges constantly under your sight. He has forgotten you, you may be sure; and disguised as you are there's no fear of his recollection of you awakening. Get a room near him, opposite him if you can, watch his comings and his goings, and give me notice in an instant if he attempts to leave Brussels. Above all, Anthony—are you listening?"

"I am listening to every word you say."

"Above all, watch for the possible arrival of a stranger, a Frenchman, at the Count's house. You—you—" her voice faltered visibly, "could not mistake the appearance of the person I speak of. A tall, high-featured man of about thirty, but looking fifty or more, stooping in the shoulders, and with brown hair thickly patched with white. Will you remember this?"

"Yes; every word of it."

"Anthony, if that man comes to Brussels—if that man and St. Georges meet without my knowledge, I am lost! I can't tell you all the story now, so you must take my word for the truth of what I do say. This man was—is—must be always—my bitterest enemy! If he were gone from the face of the earth I could feel free. Never till then!"

"Oh! It was not St. Georges, then, but this man?" remarked Stretton, still in the same monotonous, quiet sort of tone. "Another 'comrade' for whom your fancy has cooled. Well, 'tis the same, quite the same to me! I shan't forget the description. Tall, high-fea-

tured, looks an old man at thirty, has brown hair thickly patched with white. You have no moral compunction as to *his* death, I suppose?"

"Did I not tell you he was my bitterest enemy?—that I should never be free until he was swept away from the earth? Compunctions! What fool do you think me grown, Anthony, that you should ask me such questions as these?"

He gave a low, curious laugh at the sudden passionate indignation of her tone. "Fool! I must indeed be a fool myself to think that you would ever feel weakness or pity while you lived! Nita, I read in the paper the other day that some men—parsons, too—are trying to say there is no devil and no hell after all; and they hold to it so firmly they give up their livings sooner than preach the contrary. I wonder whether they'd alter if they could know you?—know you as I've known you?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Anthony; I don't feel wicked, as good people always say they do. If men were honourable and would leave me

alone, I don't think I should ever do anything bad again. But what's the good of talking?" she interrupted herself abruptly, "I shall be to the end what my life forces me to be—what I've been hitherto. It was all laid, you may depend upon it; the train of all this was laid long, long before you and I were born perhaps, and what am I, what are you, but the chance matches that may be used to fire it? Good night," and now she gave him her hand, unsought. "Good night, and remember your promise! Don't seek to come near me, but the moment you have anything to say, write it to me at the Hôtel des Pays-Bas, in an unsigned note, and using no names. Above all, Anthony, remember this, be prompt in whatever you do, and I will not forget you afterwards. Do you want money now? Of course you do. I ought to have remembered it sooner."

"No, no, no!" he cried, as she was about to take something from her pocket. It was a rule of Honoria's life never to be without an ample supply of ready cash. "Not a farthing! I've taken money enough from you before; but not

now. I don't undertake this kind of work for money, Nita."

"As you will," she answered carelessly, and returning her purse to her pocket. "I thought, perhaps, after your voyage, your funds might have been low. I am glad it is not the case. Good night, again ; or rather, au revoir."

But when she was in the fiacre, and had driven away from the sight of his face, as it stared after her, white and desperate, in the moonlight, the thought of his words did stab her with an acute pain. Between that wretch and herself lay an immeasurable gulf. All the difference that lies between a man and a tiger. He was capable of human love, human jealousy, human self-respect, even yet. And she

Lost in her own thoughts, Honoria alighted at the door of the hotel, dismissed the fiacre, and was running rapidly up the centre staircase of the house, when a door on the first floor was suddenly opened, and Bryanstone, with a face like stone, stood before her.

CHAPTER VII.

PUT INTO THE WRONG ENVELOPE.

OF all the men and women who mourned over Henry Bryanstone's marriage, Laura Hamilton's grief had been perhaps the most profound. He wrote her as generous, as tender a letter as a man could write three days after his marriage, but she never answered it. She *could* not have written to him as Honoria Forrester's husband. Her heart was crushed, dead, hopeless of resurrection under the bitterness of his loss. Until she reaches thirty, with a future still possible, a woman may rally from any love-affair. With youth gone, what has she to do but succumb, mutely, uncomplainingly, just as she succumbs to the other scarcely less fearful loss of youth itself ?

Laura Hamilton made no sign. She was staying in a country house full of people at the time that the news of Henry Bryanstone's marriage first reached her, and for one day and night no eye looked upon her in her despair ; then she appeared again, admirably calm and self-possessed. Would it not have been a too-delicious amusement to all her friends to see a woman of her age sentimentalising ? Surprised ! Well, perhaps she was less surprised than any one else at the marriage. It was easy to see from the first that poor Miss Forrester was desperately in love with Mr. Bryanstone. Should say she would make him a very good wife. Thought it wrong of Letty to be so violently prejudiced against the poor thing. Hoped the family would not think her, Laura Hamilton, to blame in the matter ; for, indeed, she had nothing, or next to nothing, to do with helping it on. And then—then, when night came, this woman would spend the black hours in grief too wild for tears ; in impotent rage against the rival who had outwitted her ; in fierce hatred, ever to be succeeded by revulsions of the old

passionate tenderness for Bryanstone himself. And so she lost her flesh, and the last remaining looks of youth ; and all her friends said, in spite of her good acting, how ridiculous it was that a person of dear Laura's age could not accept the situation like a woman of the world instead of a baby.

Anything but his marriage. She felt now, as she had felt during all the years of her attachment to him, that she could have sustained anything else than that. She had no right to his fidelity. She could have borne—had she not borne?—any and every other desertion of her with a friend's constancy and long-suffering. But with his marriage the very core, the very gist of her life was gone. She could foresee so exactly the way in which they must meet now. When he had been wearied by the outer world, hitherto, Bryanstone's refuge had been at her fireside. Wearied at his wife's fireside now (she never thought he would love Honoria ; she was not jealous in the mere commonest acceptation of the word), his refuge would be in the world—his world that is to say, of men, and of men's

pursuits. And she, anyway, would be nothing ; she, who for years had had no thought save to minister to every wish, every passing whim of this man she had made a god of !

There are whole classes of human griefs that, I remark, meet with scanty sympathy either in life or in books. Any emotional or sentimental demonstration in maturity is certainly one of these. People cannot, for the life of them, believe in the love-pangs of a man of forty, or of a woman over twenty-nine. Let them lose their money, or be baulked in their ambition, and you may possibly sympathise with them. Love, and all belonging to love, is for the young ; ridiculous in everybody else ; and whatever in such matters strikes the majority with a sense of unfitness, is probably unfit. Middle-aged men and women who make gushing, emotional demonstrations *are* ridiculous. Don't they suffer as much as the young ? Well, if they do, they must not show their sufferings. And Laura was sufficiently a woman of the world to know this ; and finding, as the months went on, that she could neither get over her

disappointment, nor make her friends believe that she had got over it, she one morning quietly put her house in Bruton Street into the hands of an agent, and went away alone—yes, without even the maid who had waited upon her, and so remembered her in the days when she knew Bryanstone—to Brussels.

This was some time before his return with his bride to England. Two months later, when Bryanstone was carried into Brussels, as his friends thought, a dying man, Mrs. Hamilton was already the fashion there, living in a charming house close to the park ; entertaining twice a week ; and with several spendthrift members of the Belgian aristocracy quite prepared to give her their title if she would undertake to pay their debts.

With the first sudden news of Bryanstone's danger she had gone straight to his hotel—pride, jealousy, all but the old love for him gone—and had implored to see him, and be allowed to nurse him, at least till his wife should arrive. But Martin, a stern woman-hater always, and bitterer than ever against the whole sex now, as

being the cause of his master's accident, as of all other mischief, had sent her away roughly from the hotel. In her despair she went to the surgeons, and received the same answer from them both. She could, on no account, see Mr. Bryanstone. It was doubtful if they would allow him even to see his wife ;—how the distinction stabbed her!—in his present state. And so all Laura had to comfort her day after day was the same short answer, accompanied by the same shrug of the shoulders, when, after hours of patient waiting, she could succeed in way-laying one of the surgeons as he left the hotel, or, more rarely still, could exchange a word or two with the potentate of the sick-room—Martin himself.

This went on for the first few days. Then Honoria arrived, and Mrs. Hamilton saw her. Mrs. Bryanstone did not at all want her husband to die. She hoped sincerely he had made some provision for her if he did die ; and, whether he had or not, she felt that, in having gained the right to wear his name, not to mention the positive possession of all his family

jewels (which she did not neglect to bring with her to Brussels), she would not have spent the last six months in vain. Still, for every reason, she would very much rather that he lived ; and she acted her part so prettily, and shed such natural tears, and spoke of "her Henry," and that horrid duel that his great love for her had led him into, with such tenderness, that Laura went away, feeling the bitterness of death in her own heart, and believing, as she had never done before, that Bryanstone had not only made Honoria Forrester his wife, but had given her his love too. A week or so later, Nelly Bertram arrived. In a fortnight the Anglo-Brussels world began to whisper, first, that Mrs. Bryanstone saw a good deal of her handsome *protégé*, the young Count St. Georges ; secondly, that Bryanstone, in his convalescence, was being nursed by a young and lovely Englishwoman ; and, lastly, what would fill three closely-printed pages of the extraordinary and circumstantial details which the British imagination seems ever ready to supply, in every contingency of life, for its compatriots.

After this, Laura Hamilton contented herself with leaving a card every week or so, with a stately inquiry for Bryanstone's health, at the Hôtel des Pays-Bas. And she began to receive again, for the first time since he was wounded, and to extend encouragement as before to such needy Belgian barons as were ready to show her attention, and to drive, and dine, and dress, and say cynically to her own heart how little she cared either for Mr. Bryanstone's infidelity to herself, or his fancy for this new face, which men said enabled him now to support his wife's levities. And all the time Bryanstone, weak in body, harassed in mind, did not even know that Laura Hamilton was in Brussels. It was no interest of Honoria's to bring any old friends about him just now ; and Martin would as soon have thought of voluntarily conveying poison as any card or message pertaining to a woman to his master's sick-room.

"And who is giving the fancy-ball, Nelly ?" Bryanstone asked, as he and Miss Bertram were sitting together, after Mrs. Bryanstone had started in her pearls and velvet to the

opera, and Nelly had spoken to him about a wish of Honoria's that she should be present at this one piece of gaiety before her return. "I don't even know the name of Mrs. Bryanstone's Brussels acquaintance?"

"The name of this one is Mrs. Hamilton," said Nelly, looking up from her work to Bryanstone's face. "A very old friend of yours, Honoria said; and I think she must be, Mr. Bryanstone, for yesterday, as I was coming in with Marie, this lady drove up to the door, and asked how you were so kindly, and looked and looked at me, till I felt quite shy. Is she a nice person? Is she really a friend of yours?"

"Mrs. Hamilton is one of my greatest friends, Nelly," answered Bryanstone; "but I can't understand her being in Brussels, and not coming to see me. Are you sure that was the name? What sort of looking-woman was the one you saw?"

"A pale, dark woman, not young at all, thirty or forty, I should think. I'm quite sure the name was Hamilton, for I looked at the

invitation to-day. Most likely it's among Mrs. Bryanstone's notes still." And rising from the low ottoman where she was at work beside him, Nelly drew forth a plate full of cards and opened notes that stood on the table, and began to search among its contents.

"Here it is," she cried, "I remember the colour of the envelope, and the peculiar handwriting. It is not like a lady's, is it?" holding the note out to Bryanstone.

"It is hers," he answered, recognising Laura's fine, firm hand in an instant. "Well, this is strange. I would not have believed Laura Hamilton would have known me to be at death's door without coming to see me. But you say you did meet her at the door? Perhaps she has been here before, and that scoundrel Martin never told me of it. I must see her, and have it all out at once. Sending *me* a formal invitation to a fancy ball!"

And then he opened the note.

Nelly's eyes were bent down over her work again, and for a minute, or more, she kept them there silently. When she looked up Bry-

anstone was putting in his breast-pocket the note he had taken from Laura Hamilton's envelope. His face looked suddenly changed, and deadly white.

"Mr. Bryanstone, you are tired, sir. Please let me ring for Martin at once. The doctors both say I must never let you stop up after I see you getting pale, and you look so pale now!"

But Bryanstone caught Nelly's hand as she was turning away towards the bell. "I am not a bit tired," he said; not at all in the docile tone with which he was used to submit to Miss Bertram's mandates; "and I don't want Martin. I shall be up late to-night. When did she get that note, child? Tell me quick."

"What note? I don't understand you, sir." She was, in truth, scared by his altered face and tone. "The invitation to the ball came two or three days ago."

"When did Mrs. Bryanstone show it you?"

"To-day, I think. Yes, I remember, Marie

brought in some other letter, that came by post, just as we had been looking at it."

"And Mrs. Bryanstone read that other letter?"

"She did, sir, with this one in her hand. She said it was only a bill, and there was no answer, and put it in her pocket."

"And afterwards?"

"Oh! afterwards we went on talking about the fancy-ball, I suppose, but I don't remember exactly."

"You remember quite enough, Nell, dear. I see it all perfectly plain. Mrs. Bryanstone only put her notes into the wrong envelopes."

"What? that is not Mrs. Hamilton's invitation, then?"

"No," said Bryanstone, quietly, "this is the bill! And as bills ought not to be left about, I have put it into my pocket. Get my pipe ready for me, Nelly; make up the fire—if your hands are big enough to wield those huge logs yonder—and then come and sit by me, and don't work. What shall I do without you, my poor little Nell?" he went on, as she obeyed him in

her quick, noiseless way. "How shall I feel when I am here by myself, this day week?"

"I needn't go unless you wish it. Uncle Frank can't be crosser than he is. I will stay, if you only say a word, till you have quite done with me."

"That will never be, Nelly. If you could stay with me for years I should want you still—want you more than at first. But you are going next Wednesday. Le Roi has told me of an escort for you: his sister, Madame Schmidt, who is taking her own daughter to London."

"Oh, Mr. Bryanstone, please! I don't want any Madame Schmidt and her daughter! If you *will* send me away, let me go alone."

"No, Nelly. You shall go, and you shall go under Madame Schmidt's escort. Poor little Nelly," he went on kindly, "'tis bad enough to have brought you at all into such a place as this—the least I can do now is to send you away in the best charge I can find! Shall you ever look back to this time, I wonder, Miss Bertram? When you are a grown-up woman, and married to some lucky fellow or another, will

you ever look back to the good work you once did for a sick and captious man here in Brussels ? ”

Miss Bertram came in a moment, and took her place by his side : “ Mr. Bryanstone, I shall remember you always, and I shall never marry, as I have often told you before. I—— ”

“ Go on. You don’t see anything in the married happiness you witness to make you anxious to try the experiment personally ? ”

“ Not at all, sir. I know that I could never love any man enough again to be able to pass my life with him—but why do we talk of these subjects ? ” she interrupted herself hastily, and turning away her face from Bryanstone’s eyes. “ There are other things to look forward to in life besides marrying and being given in marriage. I think . . . yes, I do—that it would make me as contented as I ever wish to be, if I could hear that all your trouble was at an end, and that you and Mrs. Bryanstone were living happily together.”

“ Is that quite true, Nelly ? ”

"Look at me and see, Mr. Bryanstone. Do I look as if I was saying anything false?" And she lifted her poor white face bravely up to his. "I've hardly any friends, you know. You are the first real friend I've had, besides Uncle Frank, and to know that you were happy would give me all the pleasure I am capable of. You may believe me."

"Nelly, child, I do believe you."

He took her hand; drew her to him suddenly; and before she was aware of his intention had touched her cheek with his lips. "This is our parting, Nell, dear," he said, in answer to the silent reproach he read in her eyes. "I shall see you again, of course, often, between this and the day you go, but I'm saying 'good-bye' to you now, because from to-night I shall have other things to think of and to do—things with which I would not like my last thoughts of you to be mixed. You have been the best, most patient little nurse—but I won't offend you by offering you any thanks. Tell me you forgive me all the times I've been impatient, and all the long stories of my own affairs that I've bored

you with, and give me one kiss of your own free will, Nelly. I stand in sore need of it to-night, if you only knew."

But Nelly's white cheeks were dyed scarlet : the hand that Bryanstone held turned cold and death-like in his clasp.

"Mr. Bryanstone," she stammered, "you forget I'm not a little girl, though you think me one. I—I——"

And then the wonderful transfiguration that can make the plainest woman beautiful shone across Nelly's face. And as she knelt there before him Bryanstone saw it ; and knew all her secret in an instant.

"Nelly, if you will treat me like a great lady, not like my patient kind nurse of old days, tell me this, at least. That you forgive me any weariness, any pain I have ever caused you ?"

"Forgive you ? Oh, Mr. Bryanstone——"

She started up to her feet ; stood a moment irresolute ; then stooped and touched his forehead with her lips. The wish to obey him to the last conquering shame, pride, all the hosts of instincts that make a very young girl's first

caress, even when accorded to the man she may legitimately love, so fierce a struggle to her.

"Don't call me a great lady again, please. I'm your nurse, your friend, and nothing else. Good-bye, sir."

And then she left him.

It was two hours later than this that Mrs. Bryanstone saw her husband's face advancing to meet her as she entered.

CHAPTER VIII.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

SHE followed him without a word into a room ; as his gesture bade her do ; and for the first time since the duel Bryanstone and his wife were alone. For a minute there was a dead silence : then Honoria, who knew from his face what kind of scene was coming, resolved, boldly, to take the initiative and speak.

“What alone, Henry ?” For in a matter of this kind all women, whether clever or obtuse, Amelias or Beckys, seize intuitively upon the right weapon of counter-attack. “Really I did not think that Nelly *ever* left you alone of an evening ?”

“Nor does she,” answered Bryanstone, with excessive calmness. “It is not evening now :

it is past midnight ; and I have waited here alone because I wished to speak to you."

"To me ?"

"To you. I wished to tell you that you shall not return from the Count 'St. Georges' house to mine after to-night. Do you understand ?"

"I have been to the theatre—I went to see Madame de Plessy afterwards"—she stammered.

"Don't trouble yourself to make unnecessary statements," interrupted Bryanstone, with the look that she knew too well gathering about his lips. The same look that she had seen there the night that Letty threatened to turn her into the streets. "You have been by M. St. Georges' request to his house, and have returned from it to mine at midnight. I want to use no hard words. I want no explanations with you. But simply understand this : you will not act in the same way again. As long as you still make use of the protection of my roof you will not dishonour it openly."

"Dishonour ?"

"Yes, dishonour. Do you want a plainer

word ? A woman returning, alone, at this hour from the house of her lover, cannot, I should think, complain of 'dishonour' as too harsh a term."

"I complain of it as more than harsh—as utterly, cruelly untrue !" cried Honoria, with a burst of passion for which Bryanstone was unprepared. "Henry, things have gone on too long like this with you and me. We will have plainer speaking now. You have tired of me, no doubt, as men do tire of women lower than themselves who are unhappy enough to marry them. You have ceased to treat me as your wife. You make no pretence of hiding your preference for other society than mine. But you have no right, you have no right, sir ! to insult me with a suspicion like this ! I will not bear it, even from you."

"Suspicion !" echoed Bryanstone, with a grim sort of smile. "Suspicion ! Have you, or have you not, been at St. Georges' house to-night ?"

"I have been there !" cried Honoria, across whose mind a horrible recollection was flitting of the moment she had received the Count's

note, and the possibility of having transferred it to the wrong cover. "If you had let me finish speaking I was going to tell you. I went to the theatre; then to Madame de Plessy's, and afterwards to St. Georges'. What should I stoop to tell you a falsehood about it for?"

"It would have done little good if you had," answered Bryanstone, "as I happen to have read the Count St. Georges' own note making the appointment. Allow me to return it to you, and advise you for the future to keep such letters with better care." And he took the note from his pocket, and laid it on the mantelpiece close beside her hand.

Then Honoria, who till now had been standing with downcast eyes, and gazing, or pretending to gaze, into the fire, lifted her head up suddenly and confronted her husband full. "Mr. Bryanstone," she said steadily, "I am not deceiving you in this. You may believe me."

He was silent.

"I have been to St. Georges' house to-night, by appointment, as you say. He wrote to me

from Paris asking me, unless he joined me at the theatre, to go and see him at his lodgings the night of his return, and I went. I stayed with him ; talked over the old friends he had been seeing ; smoked my cigarette with him—am I ashamed of it ?—for more than an hour. And you call this dishonour ! You are accustomed to women of the world, women of birth and education, Henry, and you don't know along how narrow a path a daughter of the people, a femme artiste like me, can walk without fear of falling. If I was a woman like your own sister, or like Mrs. Hamilton, you would be right. I could *not* have visited St. Georges innocently. But remember who I am, and what my bringing-up was, before you condemn me as you would condemn them."

She was a thorough actress always ; but there was more than acting in her voice now. For once she spoke the truth ; and Bryanstone, little cause as he had to trust in her faith, could not but acknowledge to himself that, in this, he did believe her.

"What you are, what your bringing-up was,

"I know nothing of," he answered. "You may be telling me the truth, or not. I would rather believe you are, for I don't think you fool enough to risk putting yourself in any man's power just now. But what alone concerns me is, that you should avoid all appearance of infamy as long as you remain under my protection. You understand?" And he half-turned, as if to leave the room.

But Honoria moved a step before him, and laid her hand upon his arm. "Henry," she cried, "whatever I am, or have been, I deserve one thing from you—justice. Whatever you suspect me of, let me, like the meanest criminal in your country, have the right to speak. Don't cast me from you unheard. Have you"—in the genuine agitation of the moment; before the unutterable danger of the step she was about to take; her face grew almost livid—"Have you—after all—been told of the shame of my life? of—of—the dancer, Nita? Speak. Let me hear my judgment from your own lips and no other!"

"I have heard all," exclaimed Bryanstone,

totally thrown off his guard by this unlooked-for avowal ; “and I pronounce no judgment on you save that which you must know to be inevitable ; our separation. I don’t ask you why you deceived me,” he went on, hurriedly, as she would have offered to speak. “I seek no unravelment of the past dark story of your life. You have been my wife. God knows no harsh words are needed to widen the breach between us two, now ! Confess the truth to me simply. Say that, as an adventuress who had been a ballet-dancer in her youth, an adventuress whose very name at the German gambling-tables became afterwards a by-word of infamy,” his lips trembled convulsively, “you have made shipwreck of my life, and as much as it’s in my power to forgive I’ll forgive you. The world shall never openly know the story of your shame—great heavens—and of mine too !” he interrupted himself, in a broken voice. “An allowance that will keep you in respectability shall be paid to you half-yearly, and——”

“And how, and by what right do you dare to cast me from you, sir ?” she cried, with genuine

passion lighting up all her handsome face. "I confess that I deceived you. I confess that Nita Forrester was a dancer, was, after she left the stage for ever, an employée for a single season, at the Homburg tables, and this is all! How shall you or any other man dare to say that her name was a by-word of infamy? It was not, it was not! And, even in her grave, my unhappy sister shall not be maligned while I live and have a tongue to defend her."

"Your sister?" stammered Bryanstone, under his breath. "Nita Forrester—your sister?"

"I thought you told me that you had heard all, Mr. Bryanstone? All the fearful, loathsome shame," she added bitterly, "of being married to a woman whose dead sister, in her youth, earned her bread by the stage. It is a foul dishonour for you, is it not?"

"Dishonour!" repeated Bryanstone, mechanically. "I—I—there has been some mistake. It is not of your sister I have heard."

"If you have heard of Nita the dancer, you have heard of my sister," she exclaimed, vehemently. "I will never tell another lie concern-

ing her from this day forth. Why, this secret," she added, a wonderful inflection of pathos stealing into her voice, "this secret has been my misery for all these long months past, Henry! Since we married, have you ever seen me natural, have you heard me talk unreservedly of the past, or of any of the scenes to which you have taken me? Never. You know it. I have read that knowledge on your face a hundred times, and now I will tell you why. Because day and night, waking or sleeping, I was always afraid of my secret coming suddenly to light, and your anger on discovering it. Henry, I deceived you basely. I ought never to have let you bring me, the sister of a ballet-girl! into an honourable English family. But remember, the temptation was great, for I loved you!"

She had over-shot her mark. Bryanstone knew that she had never loved him: and in the revulsion of a moment, the glimmering of a new light seemed to break upon his mind. "I never heard your sister's name mentioned, save with respect," he said slowly, and looking steadily up and down her features as he

spoke. "From the time when, as a young girl, she entered the Miss Jarvises' school, until the moment that she died, as Bernadin's neglected wife, your sister's life seems to have been passed without a stain. It is of you, madam! of you, Nita the dancer—my wife now—that I have heard."

He saw that her fingers closed convulsively upon each other; that for a moment her breath came so thick as to choke back the power of speech. This was all; and, innocent or guilty, what woman living would not show some signs of mere physical emotion at such a moment?

"I—I?" she gasped, when utterance returned to her. "Why the accusation is absurd, monstrous. I can bring evidence as to every year of my life. The Miss Jarvises will speak for me. I have letters—letters of Nita's in my possession. Henry, you do not, cannot have listened to anything so preposterously false as this?"

"I have not only had to listen to it, but to suffer for it," he answered quietly, and laying

his hand for a moment upon his wounded side. "Farnham Lumley, as you, I think, only too well know, remembered you at Homburgh just as vividly as Sir Hyde Bryanstone remembered you, years and years before, upon the Paris boards."

She was silent for a minute, then she clasped her hands, sank down into a chair, and turned her face away with a sob. "I see it all," she murmured. "Oh, fatal likeness! oh, unhappy sister! Even from the grave you have been able to ruin my happiness——"

But it was getting more and more like acting, and Bryanstone's heart was becoming more and more rooted in its disbelief. "If you would listen to me!" she pleaded, as he remained ominously, rigidly silent. "If you would only listen to what I have to say. As I said just now, give me justice. Don't condemn me unheard."

"I shall condemn you as soon as I prove your guilt," said Bryanstone, coldly; "and no assertion of yours will change either my belief or my judgment. On the day I prove what I

already know, that Nita the dancer and the woman I married are one, you separate from me for ever."

"On the day you prove it," she repeated, looking up at him, with a singular expression breaking over her face. "You are not sure, then, that I betrayed you? Henry, say that again. 'Tis something for my wretched heart to cling to in this horrible misery. You have not prejudged me. You will allow that Lumley—may my curse rest upon him!—and your uncle were possibly mistaken. Why, it's monstrous, monstrous!" she interrupted herself, starting up again to his side, and with a gesture, about whose passion there could be no mistake, clinging hold of his arm. "Don't you know that Lumley has good reason for spreading about these infamies? don't you know that I betrayed my promise to him when I married you?"

"I know this," answered Bryanstone, freeing himself in a moment from her touch, and with the dangerous look that his face could take on rare occasions rising into his eyes. "I know

this, that you sold me, doubly, infamously ; as only such a woman as you could sell a man ! Farnham Lumley had never any more intention of marrying you than I had—before my marriage morning !” he ended bitterly.

“Do you mean that as a taunt to me, Henry ? It is well chosen—very. I could have expected no other. A woman who once lowers herself for a man puts a fearful weapon into his hands from that day forth for evermore.”

“A woman who forgets herself for the man she loves, has for ever an additional claim upon him !” answered Bryanstone. “A woman who deliberately stakes her reputation against a man’s money is—such a woman as yourself. You have never loved me, Honoria.”

It was the first time to-night, it was the last time while she lived, that he called her by her Christian name ; and, granite though she was, the word, somehow, struck on her lost heart like a knell : struck on it with the unutterable pathos that even the hardest human conscience must feel for what has been—and shall be no more !

"If I had loved him I had been saved yet!" she thought. "With a tithe of Nelly's love I should throw myself on his neck and tell him all—and be forgiven! But that can never be. That is the only rôle struck off, by no fault of mine, from those that I am able to play. Henry," aloud, and with a certain dignity that was not without its eloquence, "I dare say you are right. I have not loved you, as women of the world, women of your own rank, love. Still, in spite of this, in spite of my past life, and the little worth there is in me, I believe I might have been as true a wife to you as the highest born among them all. I should not have stooped to small deceits, at least. I should not have betrayed you with the thousand petty duplicities, the thousand well-cloaked, pious frauds, with which some women of the world, some women of virtue, betray their husbands."

"Probably not," said Bryanstone, coldly. "You have too much ability to be false, save where a great interest was at stake."

"And too utter, too unspeakable a loathing

of the life of such women ever to fall even into a semblance of their morality!" she cried out boldly. "I never thought to have said it, but as you are plain-spoken, so will I be. Your life stifles me, has stifled me, from the first day I entered Mrs. Forsyth's service till now. You have been told, perhaps, by some of your kind friends, how I and my sister were brought up? How our father, a broken-down English gentleman, left his wife and children to starve, while he spent his days and nights in the gambling that ruined us. How, a few months after he died, literally on the streets, our mother, with these two wretched children for her attendants, perished slowly of consumption in a Paris attic, with straw for her bed, and hunger, and cold, and misery for her death-bed consolations. You have heard, perhaps, how, left alone and starving in the world, one of these children, through the charity of an English lady, was taken first as nurse-girl by herself, afterwards as pupil teacher in a school near London? how the other—my unhappy sister—by a far harder fate became a child-dancer, at ten sous a day, in one of the

smallest theatres in Paris. Was such a childhood likely to fit me for the well-smoothed, soft life of a woman of the world? If I have failed in making my way into your sister's regards; if I have failed in making you happy, confess that the fault was hardly mine. A life of work was what my lot fitted me for, and the greatest mistake I ever made was in seeking to change it for one of idleness, and gentle breeding, and luxury."

Bryanstone was silent for a minute or more, during which he continued steadily to watch his wife's face. At last he spoke, "If what you are now telling me was simple truth," he said, "if you had the candour to tell me that you had never loved me, but had foolishly sold your freedom for my money, and now repented of the bargain; if this was all, and you told it me with that voice, and looking as you did just now, I could have liked you better than I ever liked you yet! But this is foreign, all of it, to what I accuse you of. I say nothing of your birth, of your connections, of your inability to make me happy. I ask you, for the last time, to

confess (what I shall too soon prove) that the accusations which are brought against you are true. Do you mean to do so or not?"

"I—I—" for a minute she hesitated, an irrepressible impulse causing her to waver yet. "Which accusation do you want me to confess to?" she faltered.

"The first. I am willing, God knows! to pass over the darker infamy of the rest. Confess to me in any words, in writing if you will, that your youth was spent upon the stage, and I will deal with you as leniently, as generously, as I can."

"Put me away from you for ever, that is to say!" she exclaimed in reply. "Allow me so much a-year for the rest of my life, and loneliness, and a suspected name, for what? For having earned my bread, as best I might, when I was a girl! Henry, I cannot confess to you what never was—and what, mind, you can never prove—neither can I do away the shame of which I am guilty in having connected you with a woman, dead and forgotten now, who was an opera-dancer in her youth. But this I say: if

your suspicions were true ; if, instead of Honoria the governess, you had married her sister Nita the dancer, I do not see that you would have had a right to look upon yourself and your family as degraded by such an alliance. No, listen to me," she went on, as he turned impatiently away from her ; " I have a feeling that you and I will not have very much more to do with each other after to-night, and I think I've a right—yes, a right ! let me be what I may—to make you listen to all I have to say. You can't think—you, a man of the world—that a ballet-dancer is a woman spending her life (as the high-born ladies, who scrutinise her for their amusement from the boxes, pretend to believe) either in revelry and brilliant vice, or standing, bare-shouldered and smiling, with a heap of flowers at her feet. You know that the smiles are as much a part of the profession ; often a harder, a ghastlier, part to perform ; than the steps. That the dancer whom the men applaud and the women envy will, in another minute, be led off the stage, quivering in every limb ; with trembling distorted lips, with haggard eyes -

bathed in painful sweats ; swathed like a race-horse—to rest ? No, to exercise herself ; to be rubbed down ; sponged, re-dressed, lest she turn stiff and faint before the next act comes. You know, or you must have heard, how the days of such women are passed ! In what tedious practice, what self-denial, what never-ending work, what cruel bodily suffering under the hands of an unpitying master ! Worst of all, you must know how, at any time, oftenest long before their youth is past, such women break down ; and how the strength must be forced—the half-paralysed nerves fired with hot irons, the flagging limbs blistered, the whole miserable worn-out frame goaded to the uttermost—unless they would see younger and fresher candidates taking away their bread and filling their place ! Well, I say that this, in itself, is no more a life of infamy than is the life of some of the young girls whom I have seen in the world of honourable men and virtuous women. Each bares her shoulders and goes through night after night of wearisome exertion, with mock smiles on her lips, and heaviness at her heart, alike ! Only in the day-time, when

the one can rest, the other works and rehearses still. True, one receives her hired wages monthly, or weekly, from her employer; and the other looks to receiving hers in a lump, at the altar of St. George's. Each, according to her place, in working, with her best ability, for her own advancement; and as far as I can see, the shame, if there is any, is about equally divided. To have earned her living as an artiste, is not necessarily for a woman to have been degraded."

"Not necessarily," said Bryanstone, who had listened to her with rigid, unmoved patience. "But I am quite uninterested in generalisation, you must remember, and I am also excessively tired. Have you anything more to say?"

"I—I want to know what I have to expect?" All hope of softening him or leading him from the mark choked back by the polite coldness of his tone. "Don't expose me—don't separate from me without warning!"

"Your warning is given you, now," he answered. "I have offered you the chance of confession, and you reject it. On the day when I

prove your identity with Nita Dupont the dancer, you separate from me for ever."

"And, after another week, that day can never come!" she thought, when a moment later he had left her alone. "Bernadin gone, the last positive clue to Nita Dupont will be gone too, and I need dread neither Lumley nor Stretton nor St. Georges himself again. He may separate from me any way, but it will be on terms of my own making then! and I'll go abroad, and get introductions, and be in the world—such as it is—of Letty and her bishops still! Now to get him to appear with me at this ball of Mrs. Hamilton's! Whatever happens, I will be seen with him in my laces and silks, and the diamonds of a dozen Bryanstone generations once more!"

Once more. Could she have foreseen the prophecy those two words contained!

END OF PART X.

PART XI.

CHAPTER IX.

M. TONTIN'S BONNES FORTUNES.

AT a Leicester Square eating-house, a shade or two dingier than the one at which Honoria had come across St. Georges, M. Tontin, on the afternoon of March twenty-eight, betook himself to dine: Mrs. Fairfax having dragged poor Richard to spend a couple of days in the country with some excellent women of her acquaintance who viewed the Frenchman in the light of Anti-Christ, and would on no account permit his heathenish presence among the little chosen flock of their pious maid-servants.

Nothing delighted M. Tontin more than one of these rare bursts of freedom. Arrayed in one of Richard's coats, a pair of baggy trousers, so largely checked that each leg con-

tained scarcely a bar-and-a-half of pattern, a cherry-coloured tie, a hat fiercely curled at the sides, orange kid gloves, and white cloth buttoned-boots, Tontin trod the earth with the feeling of a man who knows that, as far as dress is concerned, he has reached the highest point attainable by human capacity. If he had read Mr. Lewis, Tontin would have said that any more elegant project for clothing man's frame than this was simply "unthinkable;" and with his sallow cheek-bones rouged, his bristly, short moustache waxed, and his whole person furiously scented with patchouli, he had walked all the way from Richard's house to Leicester Square under the profound conviction that every young woman he met had, then and there, coveted to possess him.

"Such is the perversity of the sex!" he remarked to the head-waiter, an old Parisian friend, as he looked over the carte. "With all the world open to them they persist in their fancies for a man like me. *Moi qui n'a jamais aimé, et qui n'aimera peut-être de ma vie!*" And then, with a Byronic air, Tontin made eyes at

his own hideous image in the opposite looking-glass, and stroked his moustache with the pantomimic gesture of a man who, even at the crowning point of human vanity, remembers that Pommade Hongroise is not wholly innocuous to orange-coloured kid gloves.

"André," said a voice in French, close to his ear, "Comment ca va-t-il ? Ici je m'appelle M. Blanc. Personne ne me connaît."

The muscles of Tontin's face twitched into contortions horrible to see ; his sallow cheeks paled under their rouge. To great men who have risen, the sudden mention of the name they bore in obscurity can never be wholly unaccompanied by emotion ; and, even under the protection of the British flag, M. Tontin knew there were past circumstances that might still lead to ugly catastrophes, should they come to light.

He turned slowly round to his interlocutor, and as he saw his face his own, if possible, became a shade more livid. "Bernadin !"

"M. Blanc," interrupted the other, quickly ; "Bernadin died in prison long ago. Do I look

like his ghost, camarade, or what, that you stare at me so strangely?"

"I—I—am overcome by the unexpected pleasure!" said Tontin, recovering his politeness as he remarked that his friend was tolerably well-dressed. "It is some years since we met, friend, and time has changed us both from boys into men."

"Or, rather, from men to children again," remarked the other, with a harsh laugh. "Look at my hair, André. When I saw you last—five, six years ago, is it?—it hadn't a white hair in it. Look at it now."

It was white, in patches, as new-fallen snow, and looking more unnaturally blanched than hair ever looks in old age, by reason of the face beneath being that of a man in the prime of life still. Meeting him accidentally in the street, a stranger could scarcely have failed to notice this Frenchman, and to speculate upon the life that had brought him to what he was now. His delicate, high-cut features were thin to emaciation, his cheeks jaundiced and shrivelled, his shoulders drooping, his blue eyes sunken and hollow.

"Ill?—no, no, I have not been ill," he said, in answer to Tontin's inquiries, "only living in a climate—a climate unsuited to my constitution, you understand, and not recovered from its effects yet. I'm going abroad on the 30th, the day after to-morrow, a better climate this time—Algeria, and no doubt the change will restore me. Do you dine here, *mon petit André*?" he continued. "Shall we eat together, talk over old times, old friends, old mistresses, once more together? *Hein*?"

M. Tontin was nothing loath; and, as dinner proceeded, confidences became warm and thick between the old friends,—with this difference only, that while the valet poured out falsehoods and truth together, with the unblushing simplicity for which he was unrivalled, a visible constraint withheld M. Blanc's tongue whenever he approached the two or three later years of his own life. He gave vague hints of some dark misfortune that had overtaken him; of some iniquitous household treachery; of some woman who had sold him. But these were hints only; and Tontin, wholly occupied in himself, and

speaking familiarly of Richard's house, and Richard's hunters, and Richard's movements, as of his own, never pressed for any further details respecting his friend's story.

When dinner was over, M. Blanc began speculating as to the best manner of passing the evening. He had lost the habit of sleeping, he remarked ; and, although he must be up early making preparations for his voyage, had no intention of spending any one of his few nights in London in bed.

"Sapristi, no !" cried Tontin, upon whom the effects of some very good Pomar, ordered by M. Blanc, were already discernible ; "I'll take you about with me ; I'll introduce you to English fast life ; I'll show you lovely women by the score." What time was it now ? taking one of his master's watches from his pocket—half-past six ; that left them three hours at least to get through before they could show themselves to the world. Should they go to his place, smoke their cigar, and drink a "gloria" together in memory of old days first ? His time, his services—I think he said his house

and retinue—were all at the disposition of his friend.

M. Blanc, after a little polite reluctance, consented, and half-an-hour later a Hansom deposited the two Frenchmen before the door of Richard Fairfax's house.

"The—the family is away," said Tontin, for the first time alluding to the existence of any man or woman who could be construed into the light of his employer, "and we shall be to ourselves." Then he opened the front door with his latch-key, and with a somewhat less lordly tread than that of the pavement (for there was a housekeeper whom Tontin dreaded in his soul), ushered his friend up to that little sanctum of Richard's, where Letty had taken her bishops to look at the study after Watteau.

"Here you see our real national idea of 'comfort,' " he remarked, in a piano voice, after turning on a very faint jet of gas. "Seat yourself, my friend, and regard all I possess as your own. Que diable ! 'tis not every day of the week that friends like you and me meet each other !"

M. Blanc seated himself in the very chair on which Bryanstone had been found with Honoria kneeling by his side ; a case of Richard's best cigars, with all the necessary ingredients for the "gloria"—two tall glasses, coffee, quantities of lump-sugar and brandy—were then produced by Tontin ; and the evening proceeded pleasantly. M. Bernadin, with perfect breeding, abstaining from all coarse questions as to Tontin's exact *status* in this well-appointed English house, and listening with every appearance of interest and credulity to the accounts of *bonnes fortunes*, of all kinds and dates, with which his host entertained him.

"Beauties !" cried the little rascal at last ; and when repeated *petits verres* were beginning decidedly to tell upon him. "English beauties—women of the highest position—why, I can show you a book full of them. Tenez, look at this !" and he took up a book of photographs from the table at his side ; "I have an album for each nation, English, French, Italian. This is my English one. Only honour—honour, remember ! Every confidence

on such a subject is sacred!" And shaking his head, with an assumption of the most atrocious Lovelace air he opened the book and placed it in his friend's hands.

On the first page of the book was a beautiful vignette of Honoria. In spite of all Letty's protestations, Richard had insisted upon putting it there. He was going to fill the album with all the prettiest faces he could find, he said, and Honoria, whatever her sins, had a right to stand first upon the list. Her face was one that always photographed well; and this vignette was the best that had been ever taken of her. Nearly full face; with the inscrutable eyes cast down; a half-smile on the granite-cut lips; the soft hair low on the forehead, and pushed back from the temple; the photograph was a marvel of individuality and grace. No one could look at it without exclaiming at its beauty; no one who had once seen Honoria without instantly recognising the truth and fidelity of the likeness.

Reserved as he was, a sound, something between an oath and a sob, burst suddenly from the Frenchman's lips. He started to his feet:

he literally staggered in his excitement to the light. Then he held the book up, and gazed, and gazed upon the picture with the insatiate hungry look that only love, or love's stronger brother, hate, can ever imprint upon a human face.

"Fine woman, compagnon, very fine woman!" cried Tontin, who was not quite in a state to be cognisant of the more delicate tokens of emotion in others. "But too much of the tigress in her to be altogether to my taste. Turn over and you'll find a dozen prettier. True English beauties, fair, soft—"

"André," interrupted the other, returning to his side in a moment, and laying his hand with a grasp of steel upon his shoulder. "*Où est elle ? cette—cette femme !*" His lips were drawn till his teeth showed in a ghastly smile ; a wild excitement shone on all his wasted face.

"She ? oh well, well," M. Tontin did not care to be so much pressed for details, "she is hanging about somewhere in London, I suppose. I—the fact is, mon cher, I never had much to say to her myself. Turn over and—"

"Does she live? Yes or no." His grasp tightened ominously.

"Live? of course, of course," cried Tontin, pettishly. "You don't think I fill my album with dead women's pictures—things you can buy for tenpence at the print-sellers. The young person lives, and as you seem to be taken by her face, I may as well tell you the rest at once. She's married to a rich milord—a man with one of the finest properties in England. Do you want to know more?"

"When did she marry?"

"Oh, about six months ago, I think. I really have too many such dates in my head to be very accurate."

"Where is she now?"

"Hein?"

"Where is she now, I say?"

"Well—really—I cannot say. In Italy, perhaps," for Tontin, though tightish, was by no means so drunk as not to see the expression of his companion's face. "If you turn on you'll find a soft young person—"

"To hell with your fooleries!" cried out the

other with sudden passion ; "and answer my question. Where is this woman ? You'd better mind what you say."

"I—I ? Bernadin, mon bon ami," cried Tontin, jumping up nervously ; "what have I to do with the woman or her whereabouts ? She married, as I told you, and I've lost sight of her since. If you were to go mad with love for her on the spot I swear that I could tell you no more. What possesses you about her face ? Is she the only handsome woman in the world ?"

"She's the only woman in the world about whom I concern myself," answered the stranger, doggedly. "And about her I concern myself so much that I don't leave this room till I've heard all that you've got to tell me. And truth, mind ! Quite a different style of story to any you've been giving me to-night, my little Tontin !"

Then it flashed suddenly upon Tontin's mind that matters were becoming far too serious to be pleasant ; and rendered sober by the suddenness of the attack, he actually for a minute

forgot to lie. The portrait was of an English married lady ; of—of a relation of the house. He, Tontin, had scarcely known her to speak to, and could give, at this moment, no information whatever as to her movements. Was his friend satisfied ?

His friend regarded him, after he had spoken, steadfastly between the eyes ; a kind of process inimical alike to every prejudice of M. Tontin's education, and to his own delicate sense of breeding. "André," observed M. Blanc, when this initiatory process was over, "shall I tell you what my profession is ?"

Tontin's lips quivered in spite of himself.

"I am in the employ of Government."

"In—in—?" But all Tontin's valour, all his tragic tones, all the valour inspired by the cognac, seemed oozing out fast from his clammy face ; and he could not finish the sentence.

"Yes, perfectly right ; in *that* branch of the service !" answered M. Blanc, calmly. "And with the power, but no wish, to do you any injury, unless you persist in being obstinate. Allons ! Why should you keep up the farce

any longer with me? The woman is no more to you than your master's house, or your master's coat and waistcoat, are! And, whatever happens, *you* won't be hurt by what you tell me."

"Will you swear that?" cried Tontin, piteously. "Bernadin, I have never harmed you. If I knew a thing or two against you, and found you in an honourable position, I wouldn't betray you, *mon ami*!" And, thoroughly overcome, the tears rushed into Monsieur Tontin's sensitive eyes. "You'll swear not to betray me?" he blubbered. "You'll never let my name appear, in any way?"

"Never," the other answered. Whatever he wanted to know concerned him personally. Whatever should be done, would implicate him, alone. And then, bit by bit, and deviating, ever and anon, into falsehood; but ever brought sharply back into the path of truth by the keen professional assistance of his friend, Tontin gave every detail that he possessed—including his own first suspicions—concerning Honoria.

"And they suspect her, too?" cried his com-

panion, when he had finished. "The family—the husband—suspects her of something worse than being a governess before her marriage?"

"They suspect her, God knows of what!" answered Tontin, with a shrug of his shoulders. "At all events, the husband, as I tell you, has already fought a duel in defence of her reputation, and from what I gather"—this was Tontin's delicate way of putting, 'from what I listen to of my master's conversation'—"from what I gather, only wants proof to turn her away from him altogether."

"Only wants proof—only wants proof!" repeated the other, slowly; and tasting the words as he uttered them, as an epicure might the name of the *plat* upon which he is to dine, or the lover the exact words in which his mistress has promised to be his. "Wants proof! So. He shall have it—he shall have it! André, my friend, when I saw you to-day, some voice said to me, 'the turn of thy life has come, Bernadin. Go to yonder little rascal, and speak to him, and good will come of it.' The voice spoke true. You've done more for me than any

man or woman ever did before. You've helped me to my revenge. Revenge, black as death, and sweet, sweeter than anything I know about in life! Can I reward you, André? I'm a poor man; but if there is anything I could do for you, name it, and it shall be done."

"What you can do for me is, to forget you ever met me, friend," answered Tontin, promptly. "Days have changed since you and I were together last, and the word that now means all that youth, and love, and pleasure meant then, is—character. What will you have? 'tis the inevitable lot of all of us. At forty a man is either a fool, or a good bourgeois. And I am not a fool. Swear to forget me, and I ask no further act of gratitude at your hands."

"I will do so, mon petit. From this hour forth, as long as I live, your face is that of a stranger to me, and your name (or any of the forty aliases you have borne) unknown. I swear it."

And then; this singular act of friendship

having been pledged in one more parting glass, the man who called himself M. Blanc prepared to depart.

"Hôtel des Pays-Bas, Brussels," he repeated, as Tontin, with a greatly relieved heart, saw the last of him, late in the evening, at the door—for no further allusion to a night of fast London life had been made by either of them. "I shall not forget. My business now will be to put off my voyage to Algeria till another mail; or, if that can't be done, to forfeit the passage-money with a good grace. Camarade, good-bye.

"And I have found her, I have found her!" he murmured to himself, as with rapid erect step he walked on his road alone. "Great God, I thank thee! The hour has come. For such a wrong as mine I knew that there must be a reckoning . . . and I was right! She shall see my face to-morrow."

"And this is photography," thought Tontin, as he carefully shut the book up and returned it to its place. "It's an art that commends itself, doubtless, to the simple vanity of private

individuals—but to a public character, never ! But for photography this young woman might have lived respected and died regretted, as I shall. So much for art ! ”

And then, with a lightened bosom, M. Tontin arrayed himself in (Richard's) full evening attire, and started for “The Oxford.”

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN IN THE MASK.

DURING the five or six days that succeeded that of his return from Paris, the Count St. Georges was sensible of being under strict surveillance. It was no new experience to him. At so many different times of his life, and in so many different places, he had been under the paternal care of the police, that it was rather a familiar, home-like sensation to him than otherwise to know that his movements were watched; his comings and goings dogged. All he wondered now, was, under what particular suspicion he lay? With what especial object had the evil-looking man who hovered about his lodgings night and day—who tracked him to his café,—who followed him home from his réunions—been set to watch him?

Had he known in *whose* employ that evil-looking man was, the Count St. Georges's mind would not have been quite so light as he fluttered forth, daily, to his dinners and balls ; for, thanks to Honoria, he was now in the gayest Brussels set. But his acquaintance with Anthony Stretton, years ago, had only been a passing one ; and in this wild desperado of the streets, with his hat slouched over his eyes, his squalid overcoat buttoned half-way over his face, it never occurred to him to suspect the sleek, trim, over-drest banker's clerk of former days. Anthony Stretton as he used to be before Miss Forrester and the Count St. Georges ruined him !

A note Honoria wrote him on the morning succeeding her visit to his house, had, indeed, for the present, put Anthony Stretton altogether out of St. Georges's mind. "You were right, after all," she wrote, carelessly. "I saw Anthony this morning, and found that a very moderate sum of money was all the poor wretch wanted to take himself off with. We need not have been so melodramatic last night ! He

has gone away, quite quietly, with five-and-twenty pounds in his pocket, and I should say won't trouble any of us again. He says, and his face says for him, that he is already in the last stage of decline." And then the note went on to command St. Georges's appearance at a fancy ball about to be given by the rich English widow, Mrs. Hamilton. An invitation to which she, Honoria, had procured for him and enclosed.

And the Count St. Georges accepted this invitation ; and, during the days that intervened between his acceptance and that on which he said to himself he would take the wealthy widow's heart by storm, he walked more resplendent than ever, on the boulevards, and in the park ; and came out in neck-ties each of which was a marvel of fashion and good taste ; and wore early spring violets in his button-hole ; and lovely gloves upon his well-formed little hands. And still the man in the down-slouched hat and squalid buttoned-up coat dogged every one of his movements more closely !

Among all the women in Brussels who were

looking forward to Mrs. Hamilton's ball, Honoria's was, probably, the heart most feverish with excitement when the evening of the thirtieth arrived. The thirtieth, the day on which Bernadin was to leave England, as she hoped and believed, for ever! Partly because he would not refuse Nelly Bertram's last request of him, partly because he guessed that he would pain Laura Hamilton by his absence, Bryanstone had promised to appear, in plain dress, for an hour at this ball, and Nelly was to remain, as long as he did, in a pretty little Italian peasant's costume that Honoria's taste had chosen for her. As to Mrs. Bryanstone, all the women of her acquaintance felt, as she felt herself, that she would be the empress of the fête, in her brocaded Madame de Pompadour white silk ; brocaded with bouquets of pink roses (for she made no concealment, as plainer women do, of what she would wear), with roses in her cloud of soft gold-powdered hair ; and a wealth of diamonds upon her perfect neck and arms. I say, she knew as well as her friends did, how she must look in such a dress ; but it was with far more

complex feelings than those of vanity that her head throbbed, her pulse quickened, as the hour came near for her to dress.

True still to the leading, I had almost said the sole, human weakness she possessed ; her belief in omens ; she had repeated constantly to herself during the past week that this ball would, in some way, be the turning-point of her life. The last time she would ever appear in public, honoured, and as Bryanstone's wife ; or—but from realizing the brighter augury, even now, with the sea already, as she hoped, bearing her worst enemy away from her, with the certainty of a brilliant success close at hand, her heart shrunk with an unaccountable foreboding.

“ Fool that I am to give way to such fears,” she said to herself, when her toilette was over and her maid had left her, seemingly in rapt, delighted admiration of her own image before the glass. “ I have had these forebodings before—the night . . . the night *she* died—the day when I stood by the window and watched for Letty Fairfax—the night I sat in the cab and waited for Bryanstone's return. And each

time the forebodings were wrong, and I won ! Why shouldn't I win now ? With Bernadin, is not my worst enemy gone ? Are not Stretton and St. Georges in my hands ? Blind puppets, only waiting for me to pull the string that shall send either of them, or both, to destruction ! Doesn't Bryanstone appearing with me in public, show that at least he has not judged me yet ? When he sees all the world at my feet, as they will be to-night, won't he pause at the thought of putting me away ? of publishing my shame, and his ! and letting me go ? For I *am* beautiful. I *am* what men love and desire : even he. Why he turns pale, yet, when I look into his eyes. He must—he must waver when he sees me as I am looking now ! ”

But still, and even while she strove to reassure herself thus, the unwonted weight would not be lifted from her heart ; and finding the companionship of her own image, in all its perfect beauty, so little cheering, she gathered up her skirts, and summoning her maid to carry a taper before her, started along the many-

doored, winding corridor that led to Miss Bertram's room.

As she reached the top of the landing, just opposite Nelly's door, she paused, without knowing why [such a dream of loveliness as she looked! Her roses, her brocaded silk, her diamonds shining in the solitary taper's subdued light!], and stooping a little forward over the balustrade, glanced down into the half-obscurity beneath. A man's figure was standing about half-way down the first flight of stairs; and exactly as she leaned over he lifted up his head and looked at her! It was too dark for her to distinguish one of his features. All she caught was a momentary glance of a pale, emaciated face; of a shrunken form; of hair snow-white as a man of eighty's. A momentary glance, and then the figure passed quickly down out of sight; and Honoria, with death at her heart, and limbs turned suddenly to stone, stood staring after him in the darkness.

No. It was not possible. She was only growing a weak contemptible fool; ever seeing

the thing she dreaded in every chance face that met her in the dark. How could he be here? Bernadin here? Was he not to leave London to-day, and was not this an old, worn man utterly unlike Bernadin, save—save for that turn of the head, that terrible trick of the eyes that for a moment had sickened her? With a supreme effort she nerved herself; thrust the new omen of evil boldly aside; and with a smile upon her lips—had she not learned to smile at will, from the time she was fourteen?—passed on into Nelly Bertram's room.

It would be difficult to picture a greater contrast than the two young women presented to each other at this moment. Honoria, magnificent in her silks and jewels, her complexion artfully, delicately white and red, her golden hair in clouds of fleecy curls, the professional smile, that passes current so excellently with the world, upon her lips. Nelly, in her simple peasant-dress, her thin cheeks pale and dark just as nature made them, her brown hair plainly drawn back from her temples, and a heavy, joyless expression—was she not to leave

what she loved upon the morrow?—visible upon all her face.

Mrs. Bryanstone came up and examined the details of her dress with attention. "You look very well, Nelly. The dress is a real one, and it suits you. Only one thing—you won't mind my saying it? Your complexion is a great deal too pale, child, for a fancy-ball."

"Too pale for any ball!" said the girl, quickly; and glancing at the two reflections that seemed to mock her so bitterly from the cheval-glass. "But as I am only going to be a spectator for an hour or two, it does not matter over-much."

"Spectator or actor," answered Honoria, "it is as well to make as much of yourself as possible. What should I look, in all my silks and diamonds and gold-powder, if I had no rouge upon my cheeks? I'm no more ashamed of it than I am of the mock-roses in my hair. Why should I be? Are they not both equally false, and equally requisite before the foot-lights—I—I mean—under the gas? Take my advice, Nelly, for once. Don't be old-fashioned, and

let me put the slightest shade of pink on your cheeks. I'll get it in a moment, if you like."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Bryanstone. You are very good—I am certain your offer is meant kindly—but I would rather go plain and un-beautified as I am."

"Oh, as you like!" answered Honoria, carelessly. "Rouge végétal no doubt represents some deadly sin to your mind, and you feel conscious of performing a moral duty in being pale. I really forgot what I was about when I proposed it to you."

"Rouge végétal represents nothing but rouge végétal to me," said Nelly. "And as for morality, I don't go in for it—indeed, I don't believe I rightly know what it is! I have quite another reason for saying I would not have my cheeks rouged."

"May I hear it? You certainly want none at present, child. Your cheeks are rosier than mine—and with a better tinge of red!" added Honoria, in spite of herself.

"May you hear why I would not rouge? Yes, if you wish it. Because—once—Mr. Bry-

anstone said he hated it. That's my morality."

Mrs. Bryanstone was dead silent for a moment. Then, utterly to Nelly's amazement, she went up and laid her hand softly, almost tenderly, on her shoulder. "Nelly," she said, "if I had ever known such a morality, I had been saved!"

"Honorina?"

"If I had ever known what it was to love any man, I repeat—I might have been saved. There are heaps of religions and tomes of moralities in the world, and I've never thought much of any of 'em; but lately, since I have seen you nursing Bryanstone, I've felt, somehow, there is one good thing that I've missed, and—that might have made me different. Nelly, what is it like to be in love?"

- There was, for once, such absence of theatre in her manner, there was such earnestness in her voice, such a strange wistful look upon her face, that, for the first time since she had known her, Nelly's heart softened towards Henry Bryanstone's wife. "You needn't answer! you

needn't answer!" Honoria cried hastily. "If you were to speak you'd talk of duty, and renunciation, and self-sacrifice; and no words of that kind mean anything for you. When I have looked at your patient eyes as you nursed him, when I have looked at you, watching for him with your white face by the window, I've *felt* what love must be like—better than you can tell me! Yes, Nelly, whatever they say of me, you remember this—remember that I had it in me to be as good as the best woman of you all, if life had only given me a chance—which it never did! Are people good or bad, by choice, do you think? Was it my own free-will that made me Honoria Forrester, not Nelly Bertram? When I was seventeen, your age—do I say seventeen?—when I was a child of twelve?—hadn't it been ruled for me that I should fight my own hard, unequal battle in life? Wasn't the capacity for love taken from me before I knew the meaning of the word?—But what do I talk this rubbish for?" she interrupted herself, with a laugh. "Forget it all, or think of it only as a piece of sentiment I've put

on with the rest of my travestiment. Sentiment from me ! Come away, come away, Nelly. I have strange fancies to-night ! Five minutes ago I thought I saw a ghost's face on the stairs, and now I am calling up other ghosts—ghosts of things that never were, and never shall be, for me. There !” and she stooped suddenly, and kissed Miss Bertram's cheek, “I have said more to you than I ever did to any one else before, and, if I could have liked any woman, I think I should have liked you. Come.”

They went down-stairs ; Honoria seeing no ghosts this time ; and in another quarter of an hour were amidst the long cortège of carriages that already thronged the street before Mrs. Hamilton's house. A dense crowd was assembled to see the guests alight ; and while Bryanstone and Nelly sat silently, busied with their own thoughts, Honoria, her brain on fire with excitement, kept scanning all that sea of faces that surged round them as the carriage passed along. What was it that she expected to see as she looked out thus ? Stretton, probably ; for the poor wretch watched all her movements,

and, more likely than not, would be there to see her in her diamonds and her roses. Whom else could she expect to see? The vision she had passed upon the stairs? The man with the snow-white hair and the trick of face so horribly like to Bernadin's? Bah! Why should he follow her here—and, if he did, what mattered it? Was not the real Bernadin already on the sea, leaving England and his old vengeance behind him, and ignorant, even, whether she was still in existence?

When they got quite close to the house, their carriage had to stop for four or five minutes, and Nelly, who sat facing the horses with Bryanstone, remarked that they must be in good time, as the musicians were only now going in through a side door.

"And a man with them in a mask," she added. "I didn't know masks were to be worn. Look out, Honoria, and tell me if that's what you call a domino. There! to the right. Quite an old man, he must be, from the colour of his hair and his walk."

With a sickening suspension of her breath,

Honoria bent her head from the window, and saw the same figure that she had already seen that night upon the stairs. Whatever else he was, she could swear to that. And again her heart stood still.

A moment later, a gaunt, shabbily-dressed man pressed forward to the carriage window from the crowd, and cautiously leaning forward as she prepared to descend, whispered a word or two in Mrs. Bryanstone's ear. She stood irresolute, with her face rigid, for a moment: then she answered, in a whisper, of course, but a whisper that found its way straight to Anthony Stretton's heart, "Yes, *both*. And to-night. I will not forget you afterwards."

And then she turned back gaily to her companions, and leaning upon her husband's arm, passed on into the house.

The Count St. Georges', powdered, ruffled, frizé, was the first person upon whom her eye rested as she entered the ball-room. He thought that she smiled upon him as she had never smiled before.

CHAPTER XI.

HONORIA FORRESTER'S HUSBAND.

It was a clear spring night. Starlit, still, and so singularly warm for the time of year, that between the dances all the younger and more enterprising of Mrs. Hamilton's guests made their way out through the open windows to the large, quaint, old Flemish garden which lay around her house.

"Will you come out with me, Nelly?" said Bryanstone, as the third dance concluded. "You have seen all the dresses by this time, and I have done everything in the way of introductions, and bowing, and standing with my hat against my heart, that has been required of me by my hostess. Let us go and have half-an-hour's talk and fresh air before we go home."

Miss Bertram put her hand upon his arm without a word, and they went out together through the nearest open window to the garden. Imagine a moonlit Watteau, and you will realise the scene that lay before them. A fountain with marble Graces and Cupids surrounding it, black alleys of stiff-cut cypress, laurel hedges shining silver in the light from countless lamps, a close-shorn lawn studded over with groups of figures in silks and velvets, with here and there a solitary domino making his stealthy way on some errand of love or mischief amidst the crowd.

"I cannot help thinking that one of these masks pursues us," remarked Nelly, when they had taken one or two turns about the garden. "It is the same man, I am certain, that I pointed out in the street to Honoria, and I saw him in the ball-room standing just behind her under the shadow of a curtain, and watching her intently as she danced. There! at this very minute he has shot away into the dark alley on our left. In a minute or two you will see if he has not

managed to come up close to our side again."

"Very likely," answered Bryanstone, carelessly. "Mrs. Hamilton told me just now that she had not wished any of her guests to be in masks, but that, nevertheless, a dozen or more dominoes had gained admittance into the ball-room. It is always the case at fancy-balls abroad. Foreigners have a love we can't understand for all the small wit, and intrigue, and childish banter that the shelter of a mask permits. Does it all amuse you, Nelly? You remember that archery business I seduced you into at Lowick, when you told me you were so miserable and so bored? Does this please you any better?"

"I like very well to see the dresses, Mr. Bryanstone, and when I am home in Norfolk again I shall talk about it all to Uncle Frank of a winter's evening; and, looking back, such a scene as this will seem to me just like one of the *féeries* you took me to see at the theatre. Only——" she stopped short and looked up wistfully for a moment at his face.

"Only what, Nelly?"

"Only that this is not the theatre, sir. This is life, and we are all—even I am—playing some part in the piece. How well Honoria looks to-night!" she interrupted herself abruptly. "She is by far the prettiest woman at the ball."

"And you are the best-hearted and most generous," said Bryanstone. "Nelly, if you could, you would bring Honoria and me together yet, wouldn't you?"

"God knows I would," she cried, fervently. "Can I have any wish but your happiness, and can you ever know that, living on terms of suspicion and coldness with the woman who is bound to you for life? Oh, Mr. Bryanstone, Honoria is not all that you think. She said something to me to-night that showed her to me in a very different light to what I ever saw her in before." And then, but shrinkingly, with infinite delicacy and tact, Nelly repeated the scene that had taken place between Honoria and herself.

"Of course," said Bryanstone, with a bitter

laugh, as she finished, and speaking more as though he addressed himself than his companion, "the old '*refrain banal*,' as Murger has it. Does any woman of the kind ever fail to sentimentalise, when she can get a listener, about the life she might have led—the love she might have felt, if—but why do we speak of her?" he interrupted himself. "The last night that we are together we can surely find a better theme than my domestic concerns to discourse upon."

"None that would interest both of us so closely," persisted Nelly. "Mr. Bryanstone, I do begin to think you hard and pitiless. I thought from your coming here to-night that you were beginning to soften towards Honoria."

"Did you, Nelly? Then you made an enormous mistake. I have not changed, by one iota, from my resolves. Let me find out Bernadin, if he lives, and——"

But even as he said the word "Bernadin," a masked figure glided out from the laurel-hedge beside them, so close that it was scarcely possible he could have missed hearing Bryan-

stone's last words, and stood exactly before them. "Sir," he said, speaking in tolerable English, but with a strong French accent, "I believe I am correct. I have the honour to address Monsieur Bryanstone?"

Bryanstone bowed stiffly; and moved as though he would have led Miss Bertram away. But the mask at once stepped firmly, although without the slightest shade of impertinence in his manner, across their path. "I wish a minute's conversation with you, sir," he persisted, speaking in French now; "and, if you please, alone."

"Not now," answered Bryanstone; "not to-night. It is impossible."

The mask approached, and whispered a single word in his ear.

"That is different, Monsieur, of course. When I have conducted this lady back to the ball-room I will come out and meet you."

"No, no, Mr. Bryanstone. I'll go and wait for you beside the fountain," cried Nelly, in her independent way. "Why should I take you all the way back to the house?"

She ran away to the fountain's edge, only a short distance, but out of ear-shot, and stood there quietly, her face turned away from Bryanstone, her head bent thoughtfully downwards over the glistening basin of water. While he lives he will remember the exact outline of the slight girlish figure as she stood, and connect it with this moment of his life! The moment burnt in upon his memory as is that upon the condemned prisoner's in which the words "reprieve" and "liberty" first fell upon his ear.

"You are an officer of police, sir, you say," he remarked, turning to the mask, who now that they were alone seemed shy, or unwilling to speak. "What have you to say to me?"

"I am an employé of the French police," said the man, speaking still in his own language, and in a singularly compressed sort of voice. "I am more. I am Bernadin."

As he spoke he took the mask from his face and the lamp-light fell upon it full. It was of an unearthly white; white as the blanched hair upon his head, and with the attenuated

features set like those of a man in bodily pain.

"Bernadin," he repeated in a haggard whisper. "The man you seek, Monsieur!"

"I know no one of that name," answered Bryanstone, but his voice was unsteady. "Who is Bernadin? What is his business with me?"

"Monsieur," said the other, calmly, "I like your answer. It shows me that I have to deal with a man of discretion and of the world. Of course you know nothing of Bernadin—of course it must be I, not you, that shall betray his own counsel first! Be it so, Monsieur; if you like this description of myself better, I am the miserable wretch who, years ago, became Honoria Forrester's husband."

In spite of all his self-command, an exclamation burst from Bryanstone's lips. "Great God! of—of Nita the dancer?" he exclaimed, with irrepressible eagerness.

The stranger paused and looked at him long and steadily. "Monsieur," said he, at last, "the story I desire to tell you cannot be told in a

moment, and a lady waits for Monsieur all this time."

"That matters nothing," answered Bryanstone. "The lady is my friend, and will wait for me. Go on, sir, go on," he exclaimed, impatiently, as the Frenchman still hesitated. "Let us waste no time in unnecessary preludes. You *are* the man I seek, and I am willing to pay you the price you choose for your secret. Name it. And let us go on to business at once."

A strange smile lit up all his companion's haggard face. "Monsieur, that I am the man you seek, I know as well as you. As for price, if Monsieur offered me his year's income—a princely one, doubtless—for my secret, I would not sell it him! Money is good, is excellent. Who should know it better than a poor miserable devil like myself? But there is one thing in the world better still—revenge. For you to pay me would be to rob me of that; you understand. And I would give my life sooner than not taste it to its sweetest, to its uttermost. After waiting so long—after two years of worse

than death but stay," he interrupted himself abruptly, "before I begin, you must answer me one question. Answer it, not as a gentleman answering an agent of police, but as one man answers another on a question in which each has an equal, and a common, interest. How will you act when I prove to you all that you desire and seek to know?"

"You must speak more explicitly," answered Bryanstone. "State your question in plain words, and I will give you a plain answer."

"You promise me?"

"I say it, which is the same."

"Good. When I shall have proved to you, beyond possibility of doubt, that the lady you have married was once a dancer on the French stage, and afterwards a hired employée, a decoy at the Homburg gambling-tables, how will you act?—towards her, I mean, of course."

"In the hour when these things are proved, she leaves me," Bryanstone replied, "and while I live I shall not look on her face again. Can you ask me what I shall do?"

"And she will lose *all*?" pursued the French-

man, in an eager whisper. "Position, wealth, name,—all? Hein?"

"She will leave me," answered Bryanstone, coldly. "That I swear. What her life may be in any other way I know not. It does not concern me. Mind, *I* am seeking justice, not revenge."

"Monsieur," cried Bernadin, "the sentiment does you honour, doubtless. Perhaps if I were in your place I should feel the same. I believe I should. Before I knew her, I was a just man myself: a man acting from reason, holding his head up in the world, and now . . . well, well! Wait till my story is told and you will say I've had enough to turn a human heart to stone! enough to make me feel that no judgment you can deal out can by possibility be black enough to satisfy my intense loathing desire to see *her* punished!"

He paused a moment or two, and swept his hand hastily across his face; then began again in a quiet altered voice, and with mechanical accuracy, like a child saying his lesson by rote—as was indeed the case. During how many

never-ending days, during how many sleepless nights, had his miserable lips not repeated the very formula in which he would denounce his betrayer, should the hour ever come in which he should be free and in a position to bring her to judgment ?

“ I was a lad, Monsieur, when I first fell in love with the woman you have married : a boy under twenty, looking at her from the parterre of the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin, on the first night she ever danced there, November the 10th, 185—. She could never really dance ; as the Parisians found out when, another season, she was brought out at the opera, but she was a miracle of beauty, the fresh luxuriant physical beauty that even now, you may, I dare say, imagine her to have possessed in her extreme youth ; and, with a hundred other fools like myself, I fell madly in love with her from the first. That she laughed at me, and at all of us, I need hardly tell you. Such a woman as Nita was not likely to choose a lover from the Quartier Latin. She laughed at me ; took whatever presents I could starve myself to make her, got my

best friend killed in a duel before my eyes ; and a year later, when the public had made the great discovery that she could not dance a step, left Paris for ever, without bidding me good-bye. I wept for her for a week, then consoled myself, and thought I had forgotten her. But I had not. As much as it was possible for me to love, I loved that woman, as you will see.

"I am obliged to make my story brief ; and as my own life has no connection with the part that concerns you, I need only tell you that during the next four or five years I became involved," here he lowered his voice and glanced around him cautiously, "dangerously involved, in one of the political crises of our nation. Monsieur, what does it matter that I tell it ?—involved in a revolutionary measure against the government. You understand me ?"

Bryanstone bowed.

"Well. One day, when far other things than love or marriage were in my brain, I received a letter from her, from Nita, dated London, reminding me of my old love, and offering, at length, to marry me. She had left the stage

for ever, she wrote; had realized a modest fortune of her own; and, if I chose, was willing to share it with me. If I was true to her still, I would come at once to the address she gave me in London, and make her my wife. If not, she should accept the hand of an English tradesman who had made her an offer of marriage. And—blind, besotted fool that I was!—I went.”

“And—and married her?” broke in Bryanstone with trembling lips.

“I went, Monsieur. I arrived in London in the afternoon—how well I remember it—of a dull November day, and an hour afterwards, in the entrance-hall of the house to which she had directed me, Nita met me and fell into my arms! She was handsomer than ever, and at the end of five minutes had me as much in her power as in the first day of my boyish madness for her. I promised to do anything, everything, to the letter, which she bade me. The people with whom she was staying were relations of the man who wanted to marry her, she informed me, and would on no account permit my visits,

as a lover, to the house. Through a friend of hers she would make the necessary arrangements for our marriage in a Protestant church, but for greater security, as I was a foreigner, we would be married on the same day by civil contract—before a registrar I believe is the English term. And in the mean time, all I was to do was to be obedient and wait. In all probability I should not be able to see her again until the day when she became my wife.

“I waited patiently, Monsieur. I had constant notes from her; but (save once, when, accompanied by her, and acting blindly at her bidding, I procured the licence for our marriage) did not see her till some days later, when at the hour and church appointed I met her and was married. I knew just English enough to repeat some answers after the minister, and when the ceremony was over went off with my bride and her friend—a woman, closely veiled, and who never once addressed me—to the registrar, where we went through some other form or another again, and then was told that I was married.”

"And then ? go on, sir, go on !" cried Bryanstone. "Then, I presume, you proceeded with your wife abroad ?"

"Exactly so," answered the Frenchman, with emphasis. "Then I proceeded with my wife abroad. The woman who had witnessed our marriage went with us to the station, and stood, veiled and silent, on the platform, until the moment of our departure. Then, just as the train was set in motion, she lifted up her veil ; smiled and kissed her hand to us both

"It was Nita !"

END OF PART XI.

PART XII.

CHAPTER XII.

NITA.

"MONSIEUR," pursued the Frenchman, "I feel for your disappointment! You believed, a moment ago, that you were to be rid, legally freed, from the veriest demon that was ever let loose upon the earth to drag men's souls to perdition. And you are not. She is not, she never was, my wife. I turned round, speechless with rage, with bewilderment, to the woman I had married, and the poor wretch, white and trembling, flung herself on her knees, and holding out a letter besought me to read it before I said one word to her. 'Nita had done it all,' she cried. 'The letter was from Nita, and would explain everything!'

"What you want, Monsieur, is evidence, not melodrama. Instead of putting before you any

of the scenes of that wedding-day of mine, I shall describe to you, in as few words as I can, the machinery by which I had been sold. Wearying of her life as an adventuress abroad, Nita, about a month before this, had come over from Germany to London to see her twin-sister, the only relation she possessed, and a quiet, hard-working girl, living as governess in a school near London. She found her in delicate health ; on the eve of exchanging her position for that of companion to an elderly woman of fortune ; and between them the plot was laid of which I became the victim. That Honoria Forrester had small share in it, beyond acquiescing in all that her sister's bolder spirit planned, I believe. She had been told by Nita, or so she swore to me, that I had seen her, years before, in Paris, had been in love with her ever since, and had only sought her sister's society on account of the likeness that they bore each other. That any woman of sane intellect could give credence to such a tale of idiocy is, and was then, beyond my power of belief ; but to you and to me, now, Monsieur, this part of the affair matters little.

However instigated, Honoria Forrester did allow herself to become her sister's tool, and married me. They were extraordinarily alike. Why, when I looked at her, veiled and with downcast eyes, as she stood at the altar, I could have sworn that it was Nita! Alike both in height and feature, and with only the difference of hair and complexion that a practised artist like Nita found no difficulty in concealing and making alike for the occasion."

"But the name?" cried Bryanstone. "How could you possibly have been married, twice over, to this woman without detecting under what name she was becoming your wife?"

"Because, in the first place, I was all but ignorant of English and English pronunciation," said Bernadin; "and in the second, I conceived 'Nita' to be a diminutive or nom de plume, such as belongs to most professional women, and should have felt no surprise at being told that any other name was her real one. Monsieur," he continued, "if you could have seen the likeness between those two women, you would not have wondered at the acutest man

living falling into such a trap as that which was laid for me. On that day, with the hair and complexion altered by Nita's exquisite art, they looked simply identical. Even without any artifice, no one in Paris who saw Honoria afterwards ever for a moment doubted that Nita the dancer—faded, of course, and changed by illness—was the woman I had made my wife.

“For think of me what you will, Monsieur, I did not refuse to let the miserable tool of Nita's cunning spend her short remainder of life under my charge. My reasons for doing so were threefold. In the first place, situated as I then was politically, it would have been destruction for me to have had my name dragged forward in any public scandal of any kind. In the second place, I knew from the first, by Nita's letter, that the girl was already far gone in consumption, and could not, by possibility, trouble me long. In the third, I was at once paid over a handsome sum as hush-money by Nita ; and money then was the very life and salvation of the great enter-

prise that I, and others, had on hand. I kept her, weak fool that I was ! Let it be known—this was part of the condition, made before I received my wife's dower—that it was Nita Dupont I had married, and buried her, some nine or ten months later, with my name above her grave in Père-la-Chaise. In fine, Monsieur, I became the precise tool that Nita, from the first, designed me to be ! Hid away her own youth for ever out of sight, helped her to her rehabilitation, under her dead sister's name—and received my reward ! as you shall hear.

“ A month or so before the death of the woman I called my wife, Nita, by leave of her mistress, came over to Paris for a few days to see her sister. To see, I suspect, how I was going on, and what chance there was of her secret being compromised ! She was looking handsomer than ever ; handsomer perhaps in contrast to the other's wasted, pallid face, dressed with exquisite taste, but in sober browns and greys, as befitted the demure part she had now given herself to act, and the sight of her irritated me horribly. The

real evil she had done me was not, perhaps, a monstrous one. By a clever coup-de-main she had put herself in possession of an unstained name, while I had received a large and welcome sum of money for a few months' charge of a dying girl. Honoria herself, poor wretch! was the one most cruelly wronged in the transaction. But at the time—wearied with other thoughts abroad, and with the querulous complaints of the invalid at home—Nita in her prosperity and with her airs of virtue maddened me. And one day, when something had occurred especially to irritate my temper, I taunted her, half in jest, with my possession of her secret, and reminded her of the difference a word of mine might make in her prospects, any day I chose. A wholly idle threat, Monsieur, for my thoughts were occupied with far higher interests than those of any woman's reputation—but it was the cause of my ruin, and of dozens with me.

“I shall never forget the expression of Nita's face when I had spoken. A light such as I never saw in any other human eyes came into

hers. She smiled and came up to my side. 'Brother,' she said, 'you spoke ill then—very ill! But I forget and forgive it. Let this be my bond of peace.' And she stooped over me and touched my cheek (the first time she had ever done so) with her lips.

"At that moment I knew that she decided upon my ruin. She carried out her decision well. A week after my wife's death, I and a score of my companions were arrested, condemned, and cast into prison. For more than two years, Monsieur, I languished in a dungeon at Vincennes, and at the expiration of that time came out—what you see me! an old man before I am thirty, and a servant of the Imperial Government. Four out of my friends who were condemned with me are dead, the rest are lingering out a miserable existence at Cayenne, and I, Monsieur, have gained my freedom, such as it is, by the sacrifice of—what? Allons! this is no subject for me to talk about," he interrupted himself passionately. "What I have done I have done. Perhaps few men, breathing such an air as I breathed, living without the light

of heaven, without the sight of a human face, as I lived, would have decided otherwise. That is my affair, exclusively. Have I told you enough, Monsieur, to explain the exact debt of gratitude I owe to my destroyer ?”

“ You are sure, I suppose, that she was the person who betrayed you ? ” asked Bryanstone, his voice still calm.

“ Not only morally, but legally, positive of it,” answered Bernadin. “ On my trial, the judge remarked that, happily, a domestic treachery had saved the country from the men who were conspiring against her—(against her ! Grand Dieu, hear that ! Against her !)—and produced a packet of papers which Nita, with her sister’s help, must have robbed almost from under my pillow as I slept. From that hour I swore before God to be revenged on her. The hope of my vengeance mainly influenced me in accepting my freedom on such terms as were offered to me. And now, just when I began to despair of seeing her face again, I have seen it, and I know that the hour has come !—The hour has come ! and I am satisfied ! ”

"But I am not," answered Bryanstone, firmly. "You have told me much that sounds like truth, I confess ; but where are the other links in the history ? Where is the proof of Nita's Homburg life ? Who shall identify the Nita you knew with—with the woman you have seen to-night ?"

"The man in whose arms she is, even now, waltzing, Monsieur ! Jacques—or, as he terms himself, the Count St. Georges."

Bryanstone exclaimed involuntarily.

"The 'Count' St. Georges, who, as a child, performed with Nita at the same thirty-sous theatre in Paris ! The Count St. Georges, who, as a chevalier d'industrie, stood by her side at Homburg the night when she received the scar that has marked her for life. The scar, Monsieur, above her left temple—you know ?"

"Yes ; I know," said Bryanstone, almost to himself ; and with a start remembering that night at Brentwood, when he had stood beside her in her sleep, and realized all the new, all the horrible shame of his own betrayal.

"The Count St. Georges, at her instigation

doubtless, found me out about a week ago in Paris," proceeded Bernadin, " and, with admirable adroitness, contrived to question me concerning a certain Honoria Forrester who had, some months before, died in the service of an English lady in London, and who, he had reason to believe, was the sister of my late wife. His story, I need scarcely tell you, Monsieur, made me instantly suspect that Nita not only still lived, but was still in fear of me. I answered him, however, with the truthfulness that my experience teaches me is, with such people, the surest mystification. Told him, word for word, the story of my marriage ; expressed my rage at Nita's having escaped me by death ; and informed him that I was on the eve of starting for Algeria, where I should probably remain for the rest of my life.

" Immediately afterwards I found myself, on official business, in London, and at the end of four or five days, through a singular accident, but not worthy your attention, was upon her track. I arrived in Brussels yesterday ; found out, as I had anticipated I should do, that the Count

was here ; visited him, and bought him—alas, for human nature—at a very low price, to give up all the knowledge he possesses of his friend's antecedents. At whatever hour Monsieur may name, St. Georges and myself will have the honour of waiting upon him at his hotel."

But Bryanstone was silent. This was the moment he had so coveted after ; this was the very attainment of his desire. Honoria was in his power. He had but to name the hour at which those men should come to his hotel and confront her, and all would be over ! And every word that Bernadin had spoken—his account of the marriage, of the resemblance, and the difference between the sisters ; even to such small details as the colour of their hair, of the scar upon Nita's temple—every word convinced him that the story was true : and still he was silent. Every generous instinct, every manly impulse of his nature, rose up against the thought of the unequal fight which this woman had now to make, and bade him spare her to the uttermost ; shield her even, if need be, with his own right arm, with the shelter of

his own name, until the worst should be over ! He was English to the core, and, just as had been the case when Letty threatened to turn Honoria upon the streets, the national spirit cried out now within him not to desert the losing cause, even although it was the cause of the woman who had so basely betrayed himself !

“ I will see you, sir,” after a pause ; “ you and your witness, M. St. Georges, at eleven o’clock to-morrow, but alone. The lady you have spoken of is under my protection still, and I could not for an instant submit her to the pain of such an interview.”

Bernadin shrugged his shoulders impatiently. “ Confront her with us or not, Monsieur ! That is your affair. A point of delicacy in which, of course, a stranger like myself can have nothing to say. At eleven to-morrow, or to-day rather, it is past midnight, St. Georges and myself will be at your hotel. That is the point alone with which I have to concern myself. Only,” he added this in Bryanstone’s ear as he turned to leave, “ only take my advice thus far, and say no

word to her in the interval of having seen me here. She is capable of anything, and your own life would scarce be safe if you told her that you and Bernadin had spoken."

And then, with the quiet, stealthy step of his profession, he glided away, and Bryanstone, like one in a dream, stood gazing at the drooping girlish figure by the fountain—the girlish figure which the last five minutes had brought so strangely near! had brought, at least, within the possibility of his possession!

He was standing so still, lost in the confusion of his own thoughts, when Nelly turned her head, and, seeing him alone, ran back directly to his side. "The man in the mask safely gone, then?" she said, laying her hand upon Bryanstone's arm. "Do you know I felt quite nervous all the time he was talking to you. He had just the stealthy air of a man who would carry a stiletto in his breast, had he not?" And with a child's carelessness of misconception, she pressed Bryanstone's arm, as the mere possibility of his having been in danger crossed her thoughts.

"Nelly," he remarked, after a minute or two, "I wonder whether it's imperatively necessary that you should go away to-morrow?"

"You have told me so, Mr. Bryanstone. You have made me feel quite clearly that you did not wish me to remain."

"Have I? have I, indeed? Nelly, remember that. Some day I shall like you to remember exactly how I acted towards you when I was bound."

"Mr. Bryanstone?"

"Some day, when——. But let us walk! let us walk, and be like all the rest of the people!" he interrupted himself. "I am not quite right to-night, Nelly. My head is not over-clear, and something your friend in the mask told me has made it worse. It's a pretty scene, is it not? these dark over-arched alleys, the falling water, the quaint old house? Some day I should like to travel further with you, Nelly; show you Rome and Venice, and all the other places I used to like, years ago. It would almost make me young again to see them with you."

She turned away her head from him, and silently they resumed their walk. But the world seemed suddenly set to a new tune for Miss Bertram! Hope she had none. She knew that she must part from Bryanstone on the morrow. She believed him bound irrevocably to another woman than herself. But she *knew*, for the first time, that if he was free he would be at her feet. And the stars shone whiter, and the air of the soft spring night kissed her lips as it passed; and she knew that merely to walk thus, with her hand coldly touching his arm, and with strangers around them, and no speech from either of their lips, was heaven!—happiness greater, poor little Nelly! than she could ever by possibility taste again while she lived.

A quarter of an hour later they had returned to the fountain's edge, and were standing—almost the only people now in the garden—when suddenly a strange glare of light upon the water made them both turn quickly round. The last dance before supper, the “Galop Invernal,” was being

played, and the ball-room was crowded with dancers.

"It could only have been a flash from the lamps," said Nelly. "Everything looks as it did five minutes ago ; but for a moment I certainly thought there was a flame like fire, did not you ?"

As she finished speaking, a broad volume of smoke rose slowly above a low wing of the building immediately to the left of the ball-room ; and again all the garden reddened under a wave of lurid light. In another moment a flame, bright and piercing, shot up from the very centre of the out-building upon the clear night sky. It was fire. And utterly unconscious what enfolded them, the music played on, and the dancers whirled faster and faster, with only a few feet of rapidly-consuming lath and plaster between them and the on-coming destruction.

"It is discovered !" exclaimed Nelly, breathless with excitement. "Thank heaven, it is discovered ! Some one is out on the roof already."

She pointed to the leads, close beside where the first flame had burst out, and Bryanstone saw the outline of a man's figure, cautiously preparing to descend upon the side next to the garden. Even in that momentary glance, a singularity in the shambling, awkward gait brought back the stranger of Lowick Place to his mind. And with that remembrance came an irresistible conviction that the fire had been brought about by foul play, not accident. Putting Nelly aside, with an injunction not to move from the water's edge till he returned, he rushed to the first open window of the ball-room, and looked on all sides for Honoria. But she was nowhere to be seen.

"Mrs. Bryanstone has been invisible for the last half-hour," said Laura Hamilton, in answer more to his face than to what he said. "But if you really insist upon finding her, go through the closed *portière* at the end of the inner dancing-room, and I think you will succeed. She disappeared there some time ago, I know, with the Count St. Georges."

With a face of stone—a face that Laura

attributed to jealousy—Bryanstone made his way rapidly through the astonished crowds of dancers, lifted the curtain pointed out to him, and opened an old-fashioned iron-studded door that it concealed. A volume of mingled smoke and flame drove him back, half stifled, to the ball-room, and in another moment the whole scene was one of the wildest confusion.

There was of course no danger to the hundred or hundred and fifty people in the ball-room, who had only to walk out through half-a-dozen open windows into the garden. But, for the first moment, the whole of the women, and not a few of the men, did their best to make the situation a serious one by forcing themselves into those serried masses which make escape in a crowd next to impossible. Bryanstone alone kept his presence of mind ; and when the pent-up smoke had disgorged itself somewhat into the ball-room, forced his way in with admirable coolness through the door he had first opened. A small lobby, seven or eight feet square, conducted him to another door, and, almost too blinded by smoke to be able to discern what he

was doing, he groped his way to the handle, and attempted to turn it forcibly, but it was locked. This, then, must be an outer door, he concluded, or a door leading to some room not thrown open to-night. Quickly retracing his steps, he now perceived a flight of winding stairs, ascending from the lobby close beside the ball-room door, and in spite of the volumes of smoke that were pouring thickly down them, succeeded in making his way, three steps at a time, to the top.

A glance around him told Bryanstone that by this staircase Honoria and her companion might long ago have escaped in safety. The stairs opened upon a small dais or gallery, communicating with the ball-room in front, and from whence the scared musicians had already retreated to a balcony, connected by a sort of ladder of wooden steps with a conservatory beneath. Impossible that any one in this part of the building could be in danger with a means of escape like this so immediately at hand, and his worst fears set at rest, Bryanstone resolved to return at once to Nelly and see her into

a carriage before prosecuting his search for Honoria any further.

On the side of the gallery farthest from the ball-room was a small lattice, or loophole window, such as, in old-fashioned houses abroad, often admits borrowed light from one part of the house to another. But this Bryanstone at first did not notice ; indeed the smoke was by this time too blinding for him to see more than a yard or so before him. A moment only he stood still and listened,—listened to the fierce crackling of burning wood and plaster now only a few feet from where he stood ; to the confused din of voices from the fast clearing ball-room ; the hoarse shouts of the firemen who were already assembling in the street without : when suddenly, as he stood thus, a woman's shriek, agonised, shrill, despairing, smote upon his ear. Instinctively, he turned back in the direction from which the smoke came thickest ; and as he did so a bright jet of flame rushed suddenly through the little casement of which I have spoken. The whole air was now of furnace heat ; and faint, and stifling, all that Bryanstone

could do was to press on towards the open air and save himself. As he reached the balcony a hand grasped his arm, and looking up, he recognised Bernadin : his mask gone, and the red glare of the fire lighting up all his ghastly face with vivid distinctness.

“Monsieur,” he exclaimed, “leave the search to me, and go down while there is time ! In another five minutes the leads will be red-hot.”

“And she ?” cried Bryanstone. “Is she saved ? is she with the rest below ?”

“Leave the search for her to me !” persisted the other, almost pushing him towards the steps, up which two stout pompiers were already ascending. “If Nita is to be saved, I swear that I will risk my life to save her !”

CHAPTER XIII.

"YES; *BOTH*."

WITH the pertinacious constancy, oftener seen, perhaps, in crazed men than in wholly sane ones, Anthony Stretton had obeyed Honoria's behest of watching St. Georges to the letter. The bowie-knife and pistol that his life, as a New York loafer, had made familiar companions to him, in his breast, he had dogged the Count's footsteps, day and night, during the whole of the past week : and, on the afternoon before the ball, to his own intense satisfaction, had succeeded in tracking to St. Georges's house the very man for whom Mrs. Bryanstone had warned him to look out.

St. Georges was betraying her, then. The hour of retribution—retribution to be worked by his, Anthony Stretton's, hand—had come !

Two men had to be watched now, instead of one. Two men, if she willed it so, to be put to silence, instead of one. Fear! what should he fear? Could he be more miserable, more separated from her, than now? If they incurred a double guilt, would he not, as he had told her, stand a chance at least of being united to her by a mutual doom? He waited, stealthily hiding during the hour or more that Bernadin passed at St. Georges's lodgings; then followed him back to his hotel—the same one where Bryanstone lived in the Grande Place—and waited patiently, now hovering about the courtyard gates, now walking up and down the street, but never for a minute letting the hotel out of his sight till nightfall. During all these hours, food never passed his lips once; he had got strangely to do without food, he found, the last day or two. But to keep up his strength he consumed, by small doses, a whole bottle of brandy that he had hidden under his cloak when he started in the morning. The result of this regimen was that, by the time he had followed his intended victims to Mrs. Hamil-

ton's door, Anthony Stretton seemed to himself to walk on air. His brain was perfectly clear. The moment he spoke to Honoria and heard the word "yes" from her lips, he knew what he meant to do ; rid her of her enemies, one or both, as occasion might arise : and felt a glow of pleasure within him at the thought of the righteous work he was about to perform. With the acuteness of madness, he had instantly recognised Bernadin under his mask ; and when the Frenchman, armed in case of need with an order from the Belgian police, made his way in with the musicians, Anthony Stretton, unquestioned, and indeed with his slouched hat and flowing cloak looking not at all unlike one of the "artists" themselves, went in at his side.

As soon as they entered the house, Bernadin disappeared ; and Stretton, too cunning to follow him then, went quickly on with the band of musicians. A servant ushered them through some back-offices to the inner ball-room ; then, by the small lobby or ante-chamber, of which I have spoken, to the music-gallery, and here, one or two friends of Mrs. Hamilton's servants hav-

ing been admitted to see the ball, he took up his place hidden behind the rest and watched. Watched the forms of Bernadin and St. Georges, as occasionally he caught a glimpse of either of them in the crowded ball-room; watched *her*, the woman who had been his worldly ruin years ago, yet for whose sake he was about to imperil such miserable wreck of life or reputation as yet was left to him now.

How beautiful she looked to him! floating round in her silk, and jewels, and roses. How different to all the other women there, with her lustrous eyes, her fair bright hair, her marble bust and arms! Would it not be shame, he thought, that eyes like those should ever be brought to bear the coarse gaze of a cruel crowd? that that fair hair should be shorn? those arms pinioned? that neck—well, well! What must be, must. Her enemies were to die. That was certain. And if she should be implicated in the guilt of their death, it would at least (this was the fixed image which ever formed the motive of all his wandering dreams) be with him that she would suffer. At all

events, she should have another happy hour or two before the fatal moment came. She should dance, poor child! and enjoy her beauty and her dress, and her success, untroubled! Time enough for him to do his work when the ball should be over, and the guests dispersing. Both the men he sought would, for certain, remain as long as she remained. Time to way-lay them, together or separately, in the street—and keep the oath that he had sworn to her!

He watched her dance the first four dances, each with a different partner: then came a quadrille, through which she walked with St. Georges. “For policy, for policy, doubtless!” thought the poor wretch; but his teeth were set hard as he watched them. “She can’t help it. To prevent showing she suspects him, she is forced to give him this one dance. God—God—how she looks up at him though! . . . Well, but didn’t she look at me the same way, up to the hour she ruined and forsook me? Why should her soft eyes mean more or otherwise than they meant then?”

But when a waltz struck up, and Honoria

began to dance it with St. Georges, clasped close in his arms, her loose curls floating on his shoulder, a horrible doubt began to creep over Anthony Stretton's mind. He would willingly be the tool to rid her of her enemy: but not of a lover of whom she had tired! How should he say St. Georges was not her lover? A jealous doubt ripens quickly in sane men's minds: how much more quickly, then, in this poor brain from whence reason was dispossessed, and which want of food and unnatural excitement had wrought up now to the last point of tension? What business—what business—had she in that man's arms? Waltzing? aye, but no man or woman in the room waltzed liked these two! Was she not close, clasped to his breast? wasn't her breath upon his cheek? her lips (the lips *he* had vainly coveted to possess) upturned, parted, and scarlet, within only a few inches of St. Georges's?

Anthony Stretton kept rigidly quiet, knowing, with the craft of insanity, that if he once began to move, he might betray himself by his gestures; and only when the music was over,

CHAPTER

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painting-room he stopped, and for a moment his hand played irresolutely with something concealed under the breast of his coat. A moment, and then another and darker resolve crossed his brain. Let them both die! “Yes; both”—those had been her own words—and by a more lingering death than this! Die in the very room in which they had mocked *him* with the sight of their love-looks and their tender dalliance!

. He turned the key, removed it stealthily from the lock, and once more ascended to the music-gallery; from thence to the balcony outside, which communicated easily with the roof.

In another ten minutes all that wing of the building was in flames.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE VIRTUE.

"You are out of spirits to-night, Count," Honoria remarked to St. Georges, as their quadrille finished. "Has your appearance not produced that visible effect on Mrs. Hamilton that you expected, or what? I never knew you so silent in your life before."

"Nita," he whispered, "I am silent because I am afraid to speak! You look at me as I never knew you look yet. What am I to think is your meaning?"

"Just what you choose," she answered, half turning her lovely profile towards him, and casting her eyes down, as she always did when she had an expression too deep to trust to them. "I think you are the only man in the

world who would ask me such a question, but unless you were conscious of your own falseness, you wouldn't be so prompt in suspecting me of double motives."

"Madame, will you give me this waltz?"

She answered by raising her eyes for a moment with a wonderful look of surprised, pleased acquiescence; then laid her hand—he believed it trembled ever so slightly—upon his arm, and they started.

"This waltz was really some one else's," she said, when at length they stopped. "Some Flemish marquis or duke, whose name I can't read on my card; but I have liked it better with you. Jacques, I wonder whether this is the last dance you and I will ever have together!"

"The last? No. Why should it be the last?" he answered; but the words came falteringly, and she noticed that he had to bite his lip to keep it from quivering.

"I don't know why, but I have strange fancies to-night,—a sort of dim dread that things are not going well with me. I wish I

could talk quietly with you, Jacques, a few moments, and alone."

"It is difficult to find a place to do that," he answered. "The garden is as full as the ball-room, and the reception-rooms are more crowded still."

As he spoke, Mrs. Hamilton, leaning on the arm of one of her guests, stood beside them. She heard St. Georges's last words, and influenced, perhaps, by some latent feeling against Honoria, perhaps by feminine, instinctive foreboding, possibly by the mere conventional wish of being agreeable in her own house, began to regret the crowded state of her rooms, and to suggest the only sequestered spots that might yet be found. If they went quietly through the closed *portière* at the end of the inner ball-room, they would find a haven of rest in the octagon painting-room. It was lighted, she knew, for she had herself been there not half-an-hour ago, and it was positively empty and cool.

The octagon room had been an addition built on, with the lobby and music-gallery, by

a Russian millionaire who had tenanted the house before Mrs. Hamilton. It was built expressly for a studio, and was lighted only by one skylight in the roof and the small inner casement opening upon the music-gallery. A group in black marble in the centre of the room, a divan of dark silk round the wall, was all the furniture or ornament it contained ; and for a minute Honoria stood, overcome by a strange feeling of irresolution, at the threshold.

"What a queer, tomb-like room ! Only one window in the roof, and that ghastly group of figures, and the solitary lamp burning like a light before some one dead. I've no fancy for the place, Jacques. Let us go back. The garden will clear as soon as the next dance begins."

"Clear of every one but your husband and Miss Nelly," answered the Count. "I saw them vanish a while since under the trees, not at all with the air of people who would quickly return. Surely, Madame, you would not run the risk of being called jealous by following them ?"

"Jealous !" she cried with a little bitter

laugh, but as she spoke she walked mechanically through the doorway, and St. Georges closed the door behind them. "No, no, no. The time has past for either of us to play at any such nonsense as that."

She went straight on to the opposite side of the room, then seated herself with a heavy, weary air of dejection, and leant her face down against the cushion of the divan. St. Georges stood still to think how handsome she looked then, with the dark purple silk throwing out the delicate contour of head and brow, and the dim lamp bringing out in softened light the waxen whiteness of her perfect arms and neck.

"You grow handsomer every year, Nita. Youth and time stand still for you. You are prettier this moment than you were that night at the Porte St. Martin, when you threw yourself on my neck—what were you but a child then?—and cried with happiness over your own success."

"Jacques, I thought you had forgotten those old days of ours."

"Why?"

"Come here, and I will tell you."

He came close to her, then sank on his knees, and raised his flushed and handsome face full up to hers. "Why should you think that I have forgotten the old days of our youth, Nita?"

"Because you have sold me to-day."

The blood rushed up scarlet into the Count's delicate, blue-veined temples. "Sold! I"—but he stammered violently.

"Yes, sold. I have been sold by you to-day," and as he seemed about to rise, she laid one of her hands on his shoulder, and held him to her side. "It was badly done of you," she went on. "Badly done, I mean, in a worldly sense! I'd have been more worth to you than Bernadin will ever be!"

"Nita, I swear—"

"He was with you for an hour. I saw him on the stairs at my hotel; and he's here to-night. Please don't deny anything. It's foolish, and it hardens me against you. Jacques, I have not a grain of what they call truth or goodness in me, but I

don't think I have been a bad friend to you ; have I ?”

He faltered, almost inaudibly, that she had not.

“ You have never thought of me with what men are pleased to call ‘ love,’ you know, and perhaps that has kept me from being ever false to you. At all events, I have not been false. When you were a little fellow I used to help you out of my salary, such as it was,—and don’t you remember ?—when you’d the fever once, how I nursed you ? Why, I was but a child—what were we both but children, thirteen or fourteen at most ?—but still I managed to keep awake at night—don’t you recollect ?—and gave you your drink, and only left you by day for my work, and bought you oranges by stealing a franc off Mademoiselle Le Sage’s dressing-table—I, who had the best character for honesty in the whole corps ? Jacques, I don’t bring up any of this to make myself appear an angel. You know me rather too well to accuse me of *that* ! All I want to say is, that, in my kind of way, I have liked you.”

"As a child, yes," he answered. "I believe, as a child you did."

"But later, not?"

He was silent.

"Later, when you met me at Homburg, not? Not in the same way, certainly. I was a woman, you a man, and—well—my kind of life was not a life in which women ever care much for any one; my hands were full of other affairs. But I was good to you still. Where did the greater part of that fool Stretton's money go, but into your pockets? When I met you the other day in London, didn't I give you every farthing I possessed? Haven't I launched you now into the way of maintaining yourself with respectability here?"

"Nita, we have been of use to each other," he answered; but turning his eyes down from hers as he spoke. "You have helped me lately, certainly, because you were——"

"Afraid not to do it?" she interrupted him, taking her hand quickly from his shoulder. "Very well. Have it so. That brings me back to the point I started from. I am afraid of

you. I have bribed you handsomely to silence, and I should have continued, for my own sake, to do so now. And you have been a fool to sell me? How much money, pray, do you expect to get out of Bernadin?"

The Count rose, and moved a step or two towards the door. "There are other things in the world besides money," he answered, sullenly. "Whatever I have done has been done because I was obliged to do it. Is it an advantage to me, do you think, to be mixed up in any family embrouillement of you and your husband's?"

"I see. Bernadin, in his official character, has been able to frighten you into betraying me, my poor little Jacques! Into swearing to my identity, probably. That is about as much as they would want from you. When is the crash to come? When is Monsieur Bernadin to be confronted with me? You may as well say."

But St. Georges only shifted further and further away from her. "I've told you as much as I'm going to tell you, Madame. What do I

know of Bernadin, or of his arrangements with your husband ? ”

She got up, and was at his side in a moment, her hand firmly grasping his arm, her face wearing the same look it had worn when she first bade Farnham Lumley not to trifle with her. “ You know *all* ! ” she said, in her low quiet tone. “ You know when I am to be sold, and the price you are to be paid for your share in the sale. It is not for that, at all, that I’ve come away here with you,” she added. “ Do you think if I had wanted information I should have sought it from you—you, whose lips never knew, never will know, what the meaning of truth is ? I asked you, because I wished to see—from simple curiosity—how you would answer ; if your eyes and lips would lie to me to the last, as they have always done. And I am satisfied,” here she half laughed. “ Now I’ll tell you the object of my bringing you away from the ball-room. Your life is not worth five minutes’ purchase.”

The Count started violently, and his handsome face paled under its powder and rouge.

“To say ‘in danger’ would be an inadequate expression,” she went on, calmly. “Your life hangs on so mere a thread that even I myself scarce know whether it is possible yet to save it. It has been so for this week past, mon pauvre petit Jacques ! At any hour of the day or night it has wanted but for me to raise my finger, and all the Count St. Georges’s little hopes, and sorrows, and vanities would have been set at rest !”

In a moment the recollection of the man by whom he had been watched flashed clear upon the Count’s mind. The great beads started out upon his forehead.

“This—this is a plot !” he cried. “But you forget that I can make the police protect me from your threats ! I believe, from my soul, you are in league with this traitor, Bernadin, after all !”

An odd smile passed over Mrs. Bryanstone’s face. “In league with *him* !” she repeated. “Oh, la belle histoire ! Oh, what children fear makes of all of us—even of you, Count St. Georges ! In league with Bernadin ? Yes ;

about as much as I am afraid of him, or shall ever receive further injury from his hands ! You know me pretty well, Jacques ; have known me all my life. Now, do you think it likely I should find myself brought to the pass where I now am—on the very eve of losing everything, of being betrayed by all of you together—and strike no blow in my own defence ? Is it likely, I say ? ”

The Count glanced about him uneasily ; and Honoria read on his face that he was premeditating sudden retreat.

“ If you wish to rush to your doom, you will leave my side, Count,” she remarked, with an emphasis impossible to mistake. “ Talk no nonsense now about appealing to the police. The time to do that has been any time during the last week that Anthony Stretton has been keeping guard over you, and you have let it slip. The only power that can save you now is mine, and somehow—fool that I am !—I think I shall exercise it. Jacques, I don’t know how it is, but I do not want you to die ! ” And she brought her face close to his ; the face

within whose Circe influence so few men had ever come and escaped : and half-clasped his neck with one white arm.

No spectator of the scene but must have thought it one of love. What then should the reasonless brain, that was noting her every movement intently, know of her real meaning ? How credit her, Nita, with what no human being living (scarcely herself) would have believed her capable of—an outburst of pitying affection towards the miserable wretch who had already received part of the hush-money for his share in her ruin ?

“ I thought, an hour ago, I could let you die, Jacques ! and I gave the word that was to be your death-warrant—and now—now—well, you know, I’ve never loved anyone—love has not been my way of life ! ” with a laugh. “ But I have liked you as a companion ; and then we were little together, and—*que diable !* what weakness is this ? let me say it out ! I won’t have anything happen to you. I had rather that you lived and sold me again—as no doubt you will—than that a hair of your poor little head

should be touched. There!" And she just touched his cheek with her lips. "Keep close to me all night till I have means to make you safe, and never try to make me your enemy any more, petit! I'm not likely to be weak like this twice in my life, and Bernadin's face, if you choose to look at it to-morrow, will tell you, in pretty plain words, what men who sell me have to expect at my hands."

As she spoke, a hand was heard feeling at the lock of the door, and St. Georges hurriedly moved away and pretended to be engrossed in the contemplation of the marble group in the centre of the room. But the intruder, whoever he was, seemed suddenly to change his intention of entering; and finding this, the Count returned again to Honoria's side.

"Can I ever forget this night, Nita?" he whispered softly, and looking as he had never before looked, or attempted to look, into her face. "Can I ever forget your noble generosity? the unheard-of magnanimity with which you forgave me this—this miserable baseness into which I was so nearly drawn? Ah, Ma-

dame, if you could be again the *bonne petite Nita* of other days! If, when the worst comes, you and I, in another country——”

She interrupted him by a ringing laugh. “Jacques, my child,” she remarked, “shall I tell you the only way in which I regard sentiment of this description? As an article of merchandise which is sold to a stupid public on the stage at so much the *kilomètre*. I’ve done it, my friend! stood in the shop and sold it—for what it was worth—in my time! Don’t expect me now to be a customer for such brittle wares myself. What I said was true; every letter of it. As an old comrade, I like you, and in spite of your intended villany I’ll stand by you still. As to anything else—*va!* I won’t pretend to play any variations on that worn-out barrel-organ tune! ‘*Bonne petite Nita*’ of other days! Why, I never was good, never was better than now. You and I in another country! In another country, or in this, we should be sick of each other’s faces in twenty-four hours if we lived under the same roof. Come here, friend.” And going over, and

throwing herself on the divan, she motioned with her hand to him to take a place beside her, "and talk of something more amusing than all this. Dame! I wish I had a tumbler of iced champagne here. All my grand scene with you, Count, has made my throat dry."

St. Georges seated himself beside her as she bade him, but making no more attempts at sentiment; and Mrs. Bryanstone at once began to rattle on about the ball, and all she had been doing to-night, in her liveliest strain. Ordinarily, she was not a woman of many words; but now an unwonted, feverish exaltation seemed to be upon her. How could she tell at what moment a ringing sound should smite her ear? at what moment there should be a rush of feet—a hush—and then she be called upon, with ignorant horror-struck face, to act out a more difficult part than any she had yet given herself to play? . . . The vile taste in which some of the Englishwomen present were dressed, the awkwardness of the men in attempting to carry out their characters, were the favourite subjects of her wit. She could have selected none

more congenial to the Count St. Georges, who hated England and English people as only a Frenchman who has never got farther into English society than Leicester Square can hate us. And so, with a fearful death already close around them, with all the tragedy, all the passion of a quarter of an hour ago forgotten, St. Georges and Honoria, like the true children of Paris that they were, gave themselves up, for the last time, to childish mimicry and bursts of heart-whole laughter, just as, in the days of old, they had done between the intervals of work and starvation in the dirty coulisses of the theatre where they had first toiled for their bread—such as it was—together.

For the last time!

“The heat is stifling here, Jacques,” cried Honoria, abruptly. She was strutting up and down before him, her fan outspread, her shoulders put up to her ears, rehearsing the minauderies of an elderly young English lady, giving herself the airs and graces of a shepherdess of sixteen. “I can positively hardly draw my breath. The effect, no doubt, of all the heavy

Britons in the ball-room, which no continental atmosphere is buoyant enough to bear away. Let us come out to the garden, and get a little fresh air before we go to supper. I really”

But, as she spoke, a strange smothered sound made both of them start and listen! An outcry, as it seemed, of many voices: then a sudden hush of the music in the orchestra, and the confused, rushing noise of retreating feet.

Mrs. Bryanstone moved a step or two forward, and then leant heavily against the wall. “Something must have happened,” she stammered. “Give me your arm, and let us go and see what it is. I—I—have been here with you, remember! I know nothing of what has been going on.”

She laid her hand on his arm—and, at another time, St. Georges must have noted how guiltily, how fearfully it trembled! But a new thought, a thought unconnected with her, with Bernadin, with aught save his own personal safety, was bursting upon him: and he rushed

to the door and shook its handle violently. It was locked !

“ And I am lost ! ” he exclaimed, passionately. “ Lost, penned in here to die, helplessly, like a dog ! Great God, is there no escape ? Don’t stare at me like that—Nita ! Leave go my arm, and let me see. It may be possible yet for me to escape by some other way ! ”

“ Escape ? ” she murmured, passively, and more to herself than to him. “ Escape ? Why should I want to escape ? What have I done ? I have been here. I know nothing of all this that has happened. ”

“ Then you will know soon ! ” cried St. Georges, bitterly. “ The place is on fire, and we are locked into this place to die ! So much for all your cleverness and intrigue, Madame ! Locked in here, by one of your own tools, doubtless, to die the worst of all deaths. Grand Dieu ! It is upon us already ! ” And throwing his arms up wildly, he pointed out to Honoria’s horror-struck sight a dense volume of smoke already issuing downward through the ceiling about the centre of the room.

At the sight—at the sudden conviction of *what* danger it was that threatened her—all Mrs. Bryanstone's physical courage returned to her. To confront the livid face of a dying man; to see Stretton's reasonless face already betraying her; to hear the whispers of the crowd; to stand, alone, with every eye coldly, shudderingly turned upon her. This was the vision from which she had shrunk appalled, when the first outcry of voices reached her ear. A fire; a mere common, animal terror; a narrow escape! . . . Bah! Had she not gone through it all before? Was she not in the theatre at Vienna when it was burnt—the only one of all the shrieking maddened corps de ballet—had not she, a girl of eighteen, kept quietly in her place (when others rushed into the flames), and been saved?

“Don't look so white, mon petit Jacques, and if you think it will do you good, take out your rosary—I know you wear one—and pray to it! Courage, mon petit! We can die but once, and I don't feel, somehow, that Henry Bryanstone is to be set free to-night.”

But when she had taken a closer view of the prison-house that shut them in, with its solitary window high away out of reach, when St. Georges, with frenzied strength, had striven once more to burst open the door, and failed, Honoria's plucky spirit did acknowledge to itself that, unless a miracle intervened to save them, they were lost! The air was by this time hot to suffocation; the whole upper part of the room wreathed in dense volumes of smoke, through which, in more than one place, small jets of flame were issuing. Another ten minutes without relief, and, even with the fire still kept in abeyance, no human lungs would be able to breathe in such an atmosphere as this.

"Not much left to us but shouting, Jacques," she cried, looking with a smile at St. Georges' ashen, fear-struck face. "But we may as well make one trial at that. It isn't likely—but some one, Bryanstone himself, may be looking for me, and would recognise my voice."

And then she gave the one long cry, that Bryanstone, indeed, heard: the last sound he ever heard from her lips.

"No good, Jacques, no good," she said, quietly, when another minute had passed—a minute to all the men and women without those four walls—an age, a cycle of agony to them. "Jacques, pauvre petit, I am sorry for you. You *are* so afraid."

Afraid! he was more than that. He was standing, had stood for the last two or three minutes, motionless, convulsed; as animals stand always in the presence of fire. At the quiet sound of her voice he started, and turned upon her fiercely.

"But for you I should have lived!" he exclaimed. "You are true to your character to the last. Your death will involve a man's destruction, as every act of your living life has done!" And he seized her hand; then threw it from him with almost brutal violence, and looked with a horrible expression of mingled hate and cruelty into her face.

"Jacques, have you a mind to kill me?" she said, but with perfect gentleness.

"A great mind," he answered. "I feel

nearer doing it than I've ever gone to anything I've not done in my life."

"And I, mon ami, I wish—fool that I am—to see you saved! Another few minutes Jacques, and all will be over. Don't die quietly, as I am forced to do. There was a day, I think, when Jacques, the acrobat, could have scaled a window as high as that. Are you sure it's beyond you now?"

The window was twenty feet, at least, from the ground, and opened by means of a cord and pulley attached to the opposite wall. As Honoria spoke, St. Georges' blinded eyes fell, for the first time, upon this cord, and in a moment the wild thought crossed his brain of making it aid in his escape. In the hands of any ordinary man so slight a stay must have availed nothing; but the training of St. Georges' early profession—the profession of which, amidst all his deeds, he had been most ashamed—stood him in good stead now. With the lightness of a wild cat, and almost before Honoria could track his movements, he had raised himself ten or twelve feet from the ground. Then he

paused—during one breathless awful moment—and knew that his weight was too great—that the cord was slackening in his grasp!

“Make a spring, or you are lost! Make a spring—let go the rope!” cried Honoria, with marvellous presence of mind. “Ah,” with a sort of sob this came, “*Dieu soit béni—tu es sauvé!*”

It was the first thing approaching to prayer or praise that had past those pagan lips for years. And, after all, what was it but a thanksgiving for a *ci-devant* acrobat, a French scoundrel, whose loss to the world would be a gain? But let me record, not moralize. Just at the moment when the straining rope was breaking in his hands, St. Georges gave a sudden leap, as she bade him; a leap to which the certainty of death, should he fall, lent almost supernatural energy. His outstretched hand grasped hold of the stout iron fastening of the window; and in another second (in less; the whole escape could scarcely be recorded by seconds) he was safe! Safe, with the window opened, and the fresh air playing deliciously in his poison-charged

lungs. Safe, with an easy descent of twenty or five-and-twenty feet to the ground beneath. Life—dear life—before him again, in short—

And Honoria ?

He looked back at her, and she smiled and raised her hands to him. “*Tu es sauvé, Jacques! Tu peux te sauver maintenant, n’s t ce pas ?*”

“Yes,” he answered, he could get away easily. He thought nothing of a descent like this. And besides, there seemed to be a tree of some kind nailed against the wall of the house.

“That’s right. I felt you couldn’t be going to die. Jacques, this air is horrible. My chest is on fire with pain—Jacques, Jacques, save me! Ah, Heaven, I want to live! Can you try nothing to save me? Tear away the curtain, and let it down to me! Try, at least make an effort for me! Jacques, Jacques! I forgive you your wrong to me to-night.”

But with the fresh night air the Count St. Georges’s brain had cooled, and, as in a sudden flash of light, he saw his position clearly. He

had sold this woman ; had promised Bernadin at a stipulated price to give his evidence, bear his part in her ruin. And if she lived, she must know it—must know it in a few hours' time : and then, what ? She had been sentimental to-night, certainly ; had gone in for one solitary virtue, and forgiven and saved him. But what man had ever wronged her and not met with retribution in the end ? Why should he be the exception ? And now he had her in his power, and if she perished, then and there, all would be over, and his life—his life, that he so loved and coveted—safe ! And besides, it was *not* possible to save her. Of course it was not. How could he lift a weight like hers, even supposing that he had means, which he had not, of reaching her ?—And still the air within the room grew murkier ; the fierce, the horrible crackling of consuming timber more close at hand ; the white face and arms upheld to him for aid more indistinct.

“ Jacques, I can't breathe. I can't stand this ! I can't see where you are ! I am stifling !

But if you see Bernadin, or any of them, say—I died game—and I'm not afraid—”

And then even her blinded sight descried the shadow of his figure move down from the open window ; and she knew that only the sky beyond, with its stars and its blue, was looking on her. St. Georges had gone ; had left her here to die alone !

In this supreme moment did all the spectres of her life return and haunt her ? The woman whose bread she had eaten, lying helpless and neglected in her hands ; Bernadin, given by her to a living death ; Stretton, ruined, body and soul ; Bryanstone, betrayed ! Who shall say ? We are accustomed to speak of bodily death as of an agony ; and those who watch it narrowly tell us that nature is more merciful than we suppose ; that the process of dying is not, for the most part, one even of pain. So, perhaps, of the guilty soul *in extremis*. We picture the load of accumulated memories weighing with torture inexpressible in such a moment as this : and possibly the common mother is kind still : the brain paralysed by simple, animal terror of

death is no longer in a condition either for human memory or for human remorse !

Till one returns from the dead, who shall tell us ? Who shall dare to describe a detail of the great mystery ?

CHAPTER XV.

A PASSION STRONGER THAN DEATH.

ACROSS the park ; across the Rue de la Loi ; away, with feverish haste, along the Boulevard de l'Observatoire towards the railway terminus du Nord :—then the Count St. Georges, for the first time, stopped, and took courage to look around him.

Far and near above the city quivered one broad wave of unnatural, blood-like red. The gigantic figure of the Archangel Michael glowed out, with weird significance, upon the distant Hôtel de Ville : while, closer at hand, the fretted tower of St. Gudule shone forth, fair and rosy—like a symbol of hope, even amidst the terrors of death—against the background of dark sky.

But the Count St. Georges saw neither the Avenging Angel, nor the lurid wave of blood, nor the delicate, phantom-church pointing so

horribly straight to Heaven ! The Count St. Georges saw only a white face looking to him for help ; saw only a pair of uplifted hands ; heard only a choking voice calling upon him, in vain, for rescue !

Honorina, had she left an obnoxious life so to perish, would have walked away with unfaltering step, and head erect, and heart unsoftening. St. Georges's weaker nature led him to repent, look back, vacillate, even before the deed for which he repented had come to its consummation.

Dead ? She ? With the golden hair that had brushed his neck, the lips that had kissed him, warm and trembling, not an hour before ? And he *might* have saved her. And she had been the nearest thing to a friend his shipwrecked life had known ! As a child, had nursed him, fed him, oftentimes from her own wretched pittance : as a woman, had been true, in her way, to the companion of her youth ; had given him money ; forgiven him even his last treachery in betraying her. And in return he had done—what ? Left her to die.

Not so much compunction as fear overcame him at the thought. Superstition, moral sense, conscience; call it by what name you will; something in this hour did call out within St. Georges's breast, and told him that for a deed like this no man can go unpunished. The white face looking to him in vain; the choked voice calling upon him for help; . . . God, if these were to haunt him while he lived! if there was truth, after all, in the churchyard terrors he had laughed at so often! If Nita's pitiless ghost was ever to stand before his pillow, and follow him as he walked!

Mechanically, with swift but purposeless steps, like one who walks in a dream, he turned back and made his way again towards Mrs. Hamilton's house. As he came nearer and nearer to the fire, it seemed to him that the flames, in the left-hand wing of the building, were gradually lowering under the volumes of water that were now being poured upon them from all sides by the fire-engines. Yes, there was no question of it. The fire on that side, at least, was giving way. He stood still to watch; and in another

ten minutes saw that only smoke, and fragments of lighter burning material, issued from the spot where, half-an-hour before, the flames had been at their fiercest. The entire low wing from which he had escaped stood whole ; blackened, smoking, smouldering : but whole.

Where was she ?

He approached nearer ; he crept over the same garden-wall by which he had already made his escape : then came close up to the house, which was now utterly deserted, the crowd being collected in the outer street, and on the side where the fire had not yet been brought under. Was it possible, he asked himself, was it possible that she lived still ? He looked up to the cupola-like roof of the room where he had left her, and dense leaden volumes of smoke issuing from more than one opening through the roof gave him an answer. Why, he had been away more than an hour : and when he left she was in her agony already ! The piteous voice must have been hushed long ago ! The white face, in its awful beauty, the shining silk, the roses, the diamonds be—what ?

He shuddered ; he turned away ; he hid his face in his hands to try and shut out that ghastly picture from his soul. But in vain. It was there still. And the blackened lips called out to him, even in death : and the beseeching, agonised eyes met his : and the hands that were marble no longer snatched at the wealth of diamonds, from the throat and arms, *that an hour ago were beautiful*, and held them out, as though to say, "This would have been the price, if you had saved me. And you did not !"

The diamonds. Aye ; she wore diamonds to-night that might have made him, St. Georges, rich for life : and he had left her there to perish. Fool, as well as cruel ! If he had saved her, risked his life to save her, and had succeeded, would not all she had to give have been his ? Yes. He knew the nature of the woman enough for that. And now all was gone : and he was a penniless adventurer on the face of the earth again, with a dressing-box of trinkets (bought out of her money) for his capital ! And a mine of wealth, a fortune, was, or had been, in his grasp ! . . . Had been ?

nay, was ; here—within only a few feet of blackened ruin from him—and in his pitiful cowardice he had let it go.

Had let it go—Had let it go ! But was it, indeed, gone ? Slowly, indistinctly, inch by inch, as it were, St. Georges allowed a new, a ghastly temptation to take possession of his thoughts. He recoiled from it at first with whatever of humanity there was in him. See her face again as it was now ? rob her—touch her with his hand ? Better go into the first chemist's shop he came to and take poison, and end his own miserable life at once, than do such sacrilege as this ! Yes, if one had courage to die, that might be very well. But he had not. He loathed, he trembled at the thought of death. And if a man lives, he must eat. And what is all life but a robbery ? does one man ever get on without another man suffering for it ? Nita would not suffer—there could be no further loss of any kind to her. To whom, then ? Her husband. What mattered it to him whether the husband were made poorer by the loss of a thousand pounds' worth of

diamonds or not ? He was a rich man : and the creed of St. Georges's life had been that rich men were purposed by nature and by society alike to be the meat and drink of poor, hard-working fellows like himself. Then, as to the horror, as to the sacrilege of this thing he contemplated ? Bah, was he grown so over-nice that the thought of a dead face, of touching a dead wrist or throat, had power to scare him ? Why, the whole affair would be over in five minutes : before he had time to think of what he did. Then, back to his lodgings ; pack up, and prepare to start by the first train in the morning for the other side of the world. In the confusion and horror of the fire, and of Mrs. Bryanstone's death, no thought would be taken, at first, of the disappearance of her diamonds. By the time any search respecting them should be made, they would long ago have passed out of his hands ; and he, a Count indeed, would be on his passage, safe, to any port in the United States for which he might chance to find a vessel bound.

He crept up, softly, to the wall by which he

had escaped, and felt with his hands until he came to the stem of the espalier-tree, which had already served him as a ladder. Then he stood still and listened. The air was resonant with the outcry of a thousand human tongues ; but to St. Georges it was silent ! Silent with such a silence as must have appalled the first murderer's heart when his brother lay dead before him in the yet unpeopled world. Silent by the absence of the voice that an hour ago called upon his name ! Fool, did he expect otherwise ? Could she have lived five minutes, at most, after he left her ? Was he going to lose all by delaying, and trembling, and listening, like a child frightened with some old woman's ghost-story, now ? Unless he wanted to walk straight to his ruin, to be discovered, loitering here, perhaps, and suspected of some share in the fire, let him do—what he had in hand—like a man—and do it quickly.

Rousing himself with a supreme effort to all the practical details of the task that lay before him, St. Georges remembered that a rope, or support of some kind, would be necessary for

his descent into the interior of the room ; and after a moment's consideration decided to make his way boldly round the house in search of what he required. When he found himself among the crowd, men's eyes reminded him—for the first time—how he was dressed ! Powdered, frizé, with lace ruffles, buckled shoes, and head uncovered. God, was it his travestiment only, he wondered ; or some mute witness to his crime upon his face that made them all turn and look at him so as he passed ?

He tried to speak to the first fireman he met, but the words died in his throat ; and the man, with a shrug, turned away to his work again. Then he plucked up more courage, and addressed a man-servant who, with blackened hands and face, was working, as all men alike, firemen, footmen, gentlemen, worked at the buckets.

“ A rope ? yes. There were ropes in abundance to be had, lying in a heap beside the nearest fire-engine. Did Monsieur want assistance ? Had Monsieur heard anything,” in a lower tone this, “ of the English lady and the French gentleman who were missing ? ”

No ; he had heard nothing. No, he did not want assistance. The rope was but to tie together some property of the house that was lying scattered, and liable to be injured, upon the lawn. And then St. Georges made his way to the nearest engine, as he had been told, selected a strong rope from the heap that was lying there, and pushed his road back, resolutely, through the crowd. "The English lady and the French gentleman." There was more need for haste ; there was more risk to be run then than he had thought ! He and Mrs. Bryanstone were identified in a common fate. On the first discovery of her alone, must not suspicion of the darkest kind rest on him at once ?

The thought, the danger, nerved him. Once at the foot of the wall, and he neither paused nor listened now. In another minute his light step had climbed up to the ledge of the window where, with cool unfaltering hands, he fastened the rope firmly to the iron staple, and prepared himself to descend.

Until a few minutes before, the night, as I have said, was dark. But now a pale half-

moon had risen high above the city, and shone forth, with strange unearthly whiteness, upon the crimson-painted sky. As St. Georges paused for a minute, to accustom his lungs to the heated air into which he was about to enter, the moonlight streamed full down into the smouldering room ; streamed into it not by the window alone, but by several openings that had been burnt through, but were now extinguished, in the roof. The smoke had by this time cleared sufficiently for every object the room contained to be discernible ; and bending closer—the cold dew standing thick upon his livid face—St. Georges saw her.

Her! The woman who had kissed his face an hour ago. Now a dark and inert mass ; a thing from which bright points of radiance shone in the moonlight ; but neither good nor bad, plain nor beautiful, any more. Dead ! In thus much, like to every virtuous man or woman who died on the earth to-night. And, quite certainly, beyond our judgment or our condemnation for evermore.

* * * * *

When the ruins of the house were excavated next morning, the bodies of two persons, a man and a woman, were found in the interior of the painting-room. The woman, Nita Bryanstone, bore marks of having perished, quickly, by suffocation ; and had been long dead. The man, the Count St. Georges, had evidently met his death, a lingering one, through injuries caused by the falling in of the roof—not by fire.

It was remembered then that, long after the flames had been got under in that part of the building, the whole roof of the painting-room had suddenly given way : probably through the fall of some yet-smouldering rafter. And connecting this with the fact of the Count's being remembered searching for a rope, the general report was that St. Georges had nobly returned to succour his unhappy friend, and had perished in the attempt ! Only the police, and those intimately bound up in the tragedy, knew that her diamonds were already carefully hid away in his breast ; his steps already turned to leave her, when the moment came that involved them in a common destruction.

How the fire broke out was also a subject never thoroughly made clear to the minds of the Brussels public. That it was the work of an incendiary was only too clear: the mere fact of the flames bursting out in several isolated parts of the roof at once proving, beyond doubt, that a deliberate hand originated them. And many were the stories set afloat by servants and musicians as to the mysterious man in the cloak who was seen to steal away from the gallery, then return to it and pass out upon the balcony, shortly before the first discovery of the fire.

But where that reasonless brain itself found rest, upon the pavement of what foreign city Anthony Stretton breathed his last, was never known!

CONCLUSION.

“BUT still, I can't think why they have ordered you to the south, Henry. It's all very well for you to talk about wanting to lead a lazy life, and to get away from England and English people ; I know, just as if you had told me, that the physicians have ordered you to spend the winter abroad.”

It was a silent autumn twilight, a year and a half later ; and Nelly and Bryanstone, bride and bridegroom of a week, were walking together once more upon the Norfolk moors.

Bryanstone looked down long and seriously at the tender face upheld to his. “Nelly,” he answered at last, “why, like all other children, will you insist upon having so many answers ? I am getting as strong as I ever was in my life—have I not run miles and miles for Uncle

Frank, after a reptile of some kind, this afternoon? and just because I have a fancy for joining De Bassompierre, and spending a quiet winter at Cannes, you persist in thinking that the whole of the faculty have given me over to die! When you see De Bassompierre you will get fresh ideas as to the tenacity of invalids, Mrs. Bryanstone. Why, five years ago, every physician in Paris and London said he must go in twelve months, told him to an inch how much, or rather how little, of lung he had left, and now he writes me word he is better than ever, and talks, in the spring, of going to St. Petersburg."

"I don't want to class you among invalids at all, Henry. I want to think that you have perfectly got over the effects of your accident, and that you will be strong as you once were!"

Bryanstone turned away from the pleading face, and made no answer.

"You'll like Italy, Nelly," he remarked, after a minute or two. "They tell me we can leave Cannes early in March. April we will spend in

Rome. We shall see Laura Hamilton there. You will like her, I think, for my sake, Nelly, and for all the kindness she used to show me once."

"I like her already, Henry. The letter I got from her on my wedding-morning made me like her at once and for ever."

"The letter you would not show me, Nell."

"The letter I would not show you, sir! Henry," after a silence, only broken once or twice by Bryanstone's short hollow cough, "where is Farnham Lumley?"

"Farnham Lumley? In Scotland. Letty wrote me word that she had met him at some swell place in the Highlands, and he seemed so universally popular (his wife is really dead now) that she felt herself bound to be civil to him. 'And it isn't as if he had really killed you or anything, Henry dear!' she wrote. Poor Letty! As if she ever need apologize for being civil to any rich man that all the rest of the world was running after. Even the man who had the misfortune—for me—of putting a bullet through my side." And he coughed again.

In a moment Nelly's arms were about his neck. "Oh, my love, how unjust everything is!" she cried, with a choked voice. "Farnham Lumley well, and sought after—and you—"

"I, with Nelly for my nurse; with Nelly to make me forget all the dark cloud, all the shame and bitterness that Farnham Lumley wrought for me! I would not change places with him, child, believe me." And Bryanstone folded his wife to his breast, and kissed her.

"We must go in, Nelly," he said, presently. "Uncle Frank will be waiting for us; and directly the sun goes down I begin to feel the night air heavy on my chest."

She looked up at his pale face, and blinding tears rushed into her eyes while she looked.

As in every human hope, the elements of death were in Nelly's joy from the first!

THE END.

